A STARLESS CLAN

WARRIORS

WIND

ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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HARPER
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

Special thanks to Cherith Baldry

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

SQUIRRELSTAR—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes and one white paw

DEPUTY

IVYPOOL—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

MEDICINE CATS

JAYFEATHER—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

ALDERHEART—dark ginger tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

WHITEWING—white she-cat with green eyes

BIRCHFALL—light brown tabby tom

SUNBEAM—brown-and-white tabby she-cat

MOUSEWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

BAYSHINE—golden tabby tom

POPPYFROST—pale tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

LILYHEART—small, dark tabby she-cat with white patches and blue eyes

NIGHTHEART—black tom

BUMBLESTRIPE—very pale gray tom with black stripes

CHERRYFALL—ginger she-cat

MOLEWHISKER—brown-and-cream tom

CINDERHEART—gray tabby she-cat

FINCHLIGHT—tortoiseshell she-cat

BLOSSOMFALL—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with

petal-shaped white patches

EAGLEWING—ginger she-cat

MYRTLEBLOOM—pale brown she-cat

DEWNOSE—gray-and-white tom

THRIFTEAR—dark gray she-cat

STORMCLOUD—gray tabby tom

HOLLYTUFT—black she-cat

FERNSONG—yellow tabby tom

HONEYFUR—white she-cat with yellow splotches

SPARKPELT—orange tabby she-cat

SORRELSTRIPE—dark brown she-cat

TWIGBRANCH—gray she-cat with green eyes

FINLEAP—brown tom

SHELLFUR—tortoiseshell tom

FERNSTRIPE—gray tabby she-cat

PLUMSTONE—black-and-ginger she-cat

FLIPCLAW—brown tabby tom

LEAFSHADE—tortoiseshell she-cat

LIONBLAZE—golden tabby tom with amber eyes

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

DAISY—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

SPOTFUR—spotted tabby she-cat (mother to Bristlekit, an orange-and-white tabby she-kit; Stemkit, an orange tabby tom; and Graykit, a white tom with gray spots)

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

BRAMBLECLAW—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

THORNCLAW—golden-brown tabby tom

CLOUDTAIL—long-haired white tom with blue eyes

BRIGHTHEART—white she-cat with ginger patches

BRACKENFUR—golden-brown tabby tom

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER	**TIGERSTAR—**dark brown tabby tom
DEPUTY	**CLOVERFOOT—**gray tabby she-cat
MEDICINE CATS	**PUDDLESHINE—**brown tom with white splotches
	SHADOWSIGHT—gray tabby tom
WARRIORS	**TAWNYPELT—**tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
	STONEWING—white tom
	SCORCHFUR—dark gray tom with slashed ears
	FLAXFOOT—brown tabby tom
	SNOWBIRD—pure white she-cat with green eyes
	YARROWLEAF—ginger she-cat with yellow eyes
	GRASSHEART—pale brown tabby she-cat
	WHORLPELT—gray-and-white tom
	HOPWHISKER—calico she-cat
	BLAZEFIRE—white-and-ginger tom
	FLOWERSTEM—silver she-cat
	SNAKETOOTH—honey-colored tabby she-cat
	SLATEFUR—sleek gray tom
	APPRENTICE, BIRCHPAW (a light brown tom)
	POUNCESTEP—gray tabby she-cat
	LIGHTLEAP—brown tabby she-cat
	GULLSWOOP—white she-cat
	SPIRECLAW—black-and-white tom
	FRINGEWHISKER—white she-cat with brown splotches
	DOVEWING—pale gray she-cat with green eyes
QUEENS	**CINNAMONTAIL—**brown tabby she-cat with white paws (mother to Firkit, a brown tabby tom,

Streamkit, a gray tabby she-kit, Bloomkit, a black she-kit, and Whisperkit, a gray tom)

ELDERS — **OAKFUR**—small brown tom

SKYCLAN

LEADER — **LEAFSTAR**—brown-and-cream tabby she-cat with amber eyes

DEPUTY — **HAWKWING**—dark gray tom with yellow eyes

MEDICINE CATS — **FRECKLEWISH**—mottled light brown tabby she-cat with spotted legs

FIDGETFLAKE—black-and-white tom

MEDIATOR — **TREE**—yellow tom with amber eyes

WARRIORS — **SPARROWPELT**—dark brown tabby tom

MACGYVER—black-and-white tom

DEWSPRING—sturdy gray tom

ROOTSPRING—yellow tom

NEEDLECLAW—black-and-white she-cat

PLUMWILLOW—dark gray she-cat

SAGENOSE—pale gray tom

KITESCRATCH—reddish-brown tom

HARRYBROOK—gray tom

CHERRYTAIL—fluffy tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

CLOUDMIST—white she-cat with yellow eyes

TURTLECRAWL—tortoiseshell she-cat

RABBITLEAP—brown tom

WRENFLIGHT—golden tabby she-cat

REEDCLAW—small pale tabby she-cat

APPRENTICE, BEETLEPAW (white-and-black tabby tom)

MINTFUR—gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

NETTLESPLASH—pale brown tom

TINYCLOUD—small white she-cat

PALESKY—black-and-white she-cat

VIOLETSHINE—black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

BELLALEAF—pale orange she-cat with green eyes

QUAILFEATHER—white tom with crow-black ears

PIGEONFOOT—gray-and-white she-cat

GRAVELNOSE—tan tom

SUNNYPELT—ginger she-cat

APPRENTICE, BEEPAW (white-and-tabby she-cat)

NECTARSONG—brown she-cat

QUEENS

BLOSSOMHEART—ginger-and-white she-cat (mother to Ridgekit, a reddish she-kit with a white nose, and Duskkit, a white tom with brown paws and ears)

ELDERS

FALLOWFERN—pale brown she-cat who has lost her hearing

WINDCLAN

LEADER

HARESTAR—brown-and-white tom

DEPUTY

CROWFEATHER—dark gray tom

MEDICINE CATS

KESTRELFLIGHT—mottled gray tom with white splotches like kestrel feathers

APPRENTICE, WHISTLEPAW (gray tabby she-cat)

WARRIORS

NIGHTCLOUD—black she-cat

BRINDLEWING—mottled brown she-cat

APPLESHINE—yellow tabby she-cat

LEAFTAIL—dark tabby tom with amber eyes

WOODSONG—brown she-cat

EMBERFOOT—gray tom with two dark paws

BREEZEPELT—black tom with amber eyes

HEATHERTAIL—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

CROUCHFOOT—ginger tom

SONGLEAP—tortoiseshell she-cat

SEDGEWHISKER—light brown tabby she-cat

FLUTTERFOOT—brown-and-white tom

SLIGHTFOOT—black tom with white flash on his chest

OATCLAW—pale brown tabby tom

HOOTWHISKER—dark gray tom

QUEENS

LARKWING—pale brown tabby she-cat (mother to Stripekit, a gray tabby tom, and Brookkit, a black-and-white tom)

FEATHERPELT—gray tabby she-cat

ELDERS

WHISKERNOSE—light brown tom

GORSETAIL—very pale gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

RIVERCLAN

LEADER

SPLASHTAIL—brown tabby tom

MEDICINE CATS

MOTHWING—dappled golden she-cat

PODLIGHT—gray-and-white tom

WARRIORS

DUSKFUR—brown tabby she-cat

MINNOWTAIL—dark gray-and-white she-cat

MALLOWNOSE—light brown tabby tom

SHIMMERPELT—silver she-cat

LIZARDTAIL—light brown tom

SNEEZECLOUD—gray-and-white tom

BRACKENPELT—tortoiseshell she-cat

FOGNOSE—gray-and-white she-cat

HARELIGHT—white tom

ICEWING—white she-cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICE, MISTPAW (tortoiseshell-and-white tabby she-cat)

OWLNOSE—brown tabby tom

GORSECLAW—white tom with gray ears

NIGHTSKY—dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

BREEZEHEART—brown-and-white she-cat

APPRENTICE, GRAYPAW (silver tabby tom)

QUEENS

HAVENPELT—black-and-white she-cat

ELDERS

MOSSPELT—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

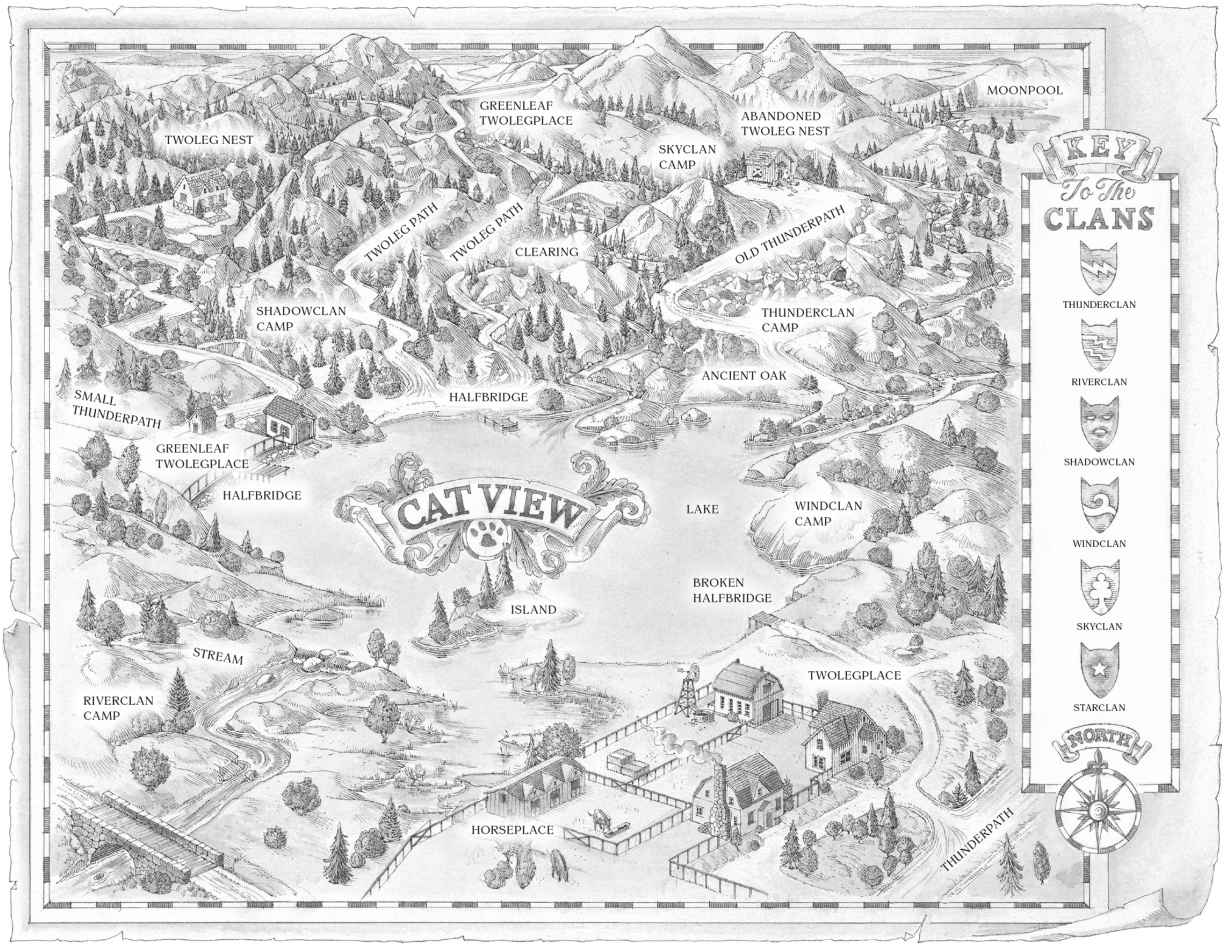
Contents

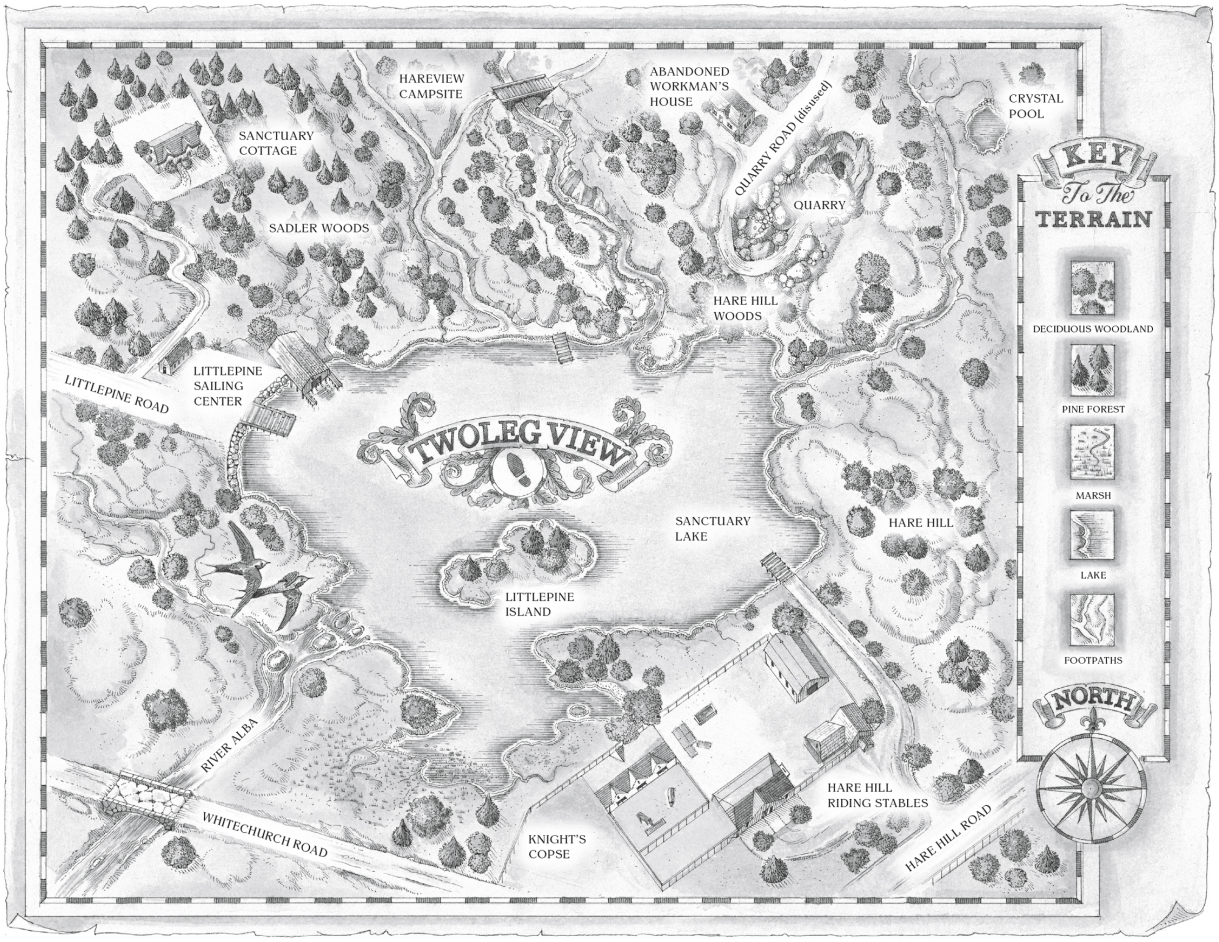
Cover
Title Page
Dedication
Allegiances
Maps

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23

About the Author
Books by Erin Hunter
Back Ads
Copyright
About the Publisher

Maps


CAT VIEW
KEY To The CLANS
THUNDERCLAN
RIVERCLAN
SHADOWCLAN
WINDCLAN
SKYCLAN
STARCLAN
NORTH
MOONPOOL
ABANDONED TWOLEG NEST
GREENLEAF TWOLEGPLACE
TWOLEG NEST
SKYCLAN CAMP
TWOLEG PATH
TWOLEG PATH
CLEARING
OLD THUNDERPATH
SHADOWCLAN CAMP
THUNDERCLAN CAMP
ANCIENT OAK
HALFBRIDGE
SMALL THUNDERPATH
GREENLEAF TWOLEGPLACE
HALFBRIDGE
LAKE
WINDCLAN CAMP
BROKEN HALFBRIDGE
ISLAND
STREAM
RIVERCLAN CAMP
TWOLEGPLACE
HORSEPLACE
THUNDERPATH


HAREVIEW CAMPSITE
ABANDONED WORKMAN'S HOUSE
QUARRY ROAD (disused)
CRYSTAL POOL
SANCTUARY COTTAGE
QUARRY
SADLER WOODS
HARE HILL WOODS
KEY To The TERRAIN
DECIDUOUS WOODLAND
PINE FOREST
MARSH
LAKE
FOOTPATHS
NORTH
LITTLEPINE ROAD
LITTLEPINE SAILING CENTER
TWOLEG VIEW
SANCTUARY LAKE
HARE HILL
LITTLEPINE ISLAND
RIVER ALBA
HARE HILL RIDING STABLES
WHITECHURCH ROAD
KNIGHT'S COPSE
HARE HILL ROAD

Prologue

Splashtail followed stealthily in Curlfeather's paw steps as she slipped into a clump of reeds at the edge of the lake. The feathery tops rustled together, hiding the slight sounds the cats made as they brushed through the tall stems. Splashtail hoped that the smell of water and marshy ground would disguise their scents, too, from any cat who happened to be nearby.

In the middle of the clump, Curlfeather halted and turned around to settle herself on a tussock of grass. Splashtail remained on his paws, irritation thrumming through him.

"What's all this about?" he demanded. "Why have you brought me so far away from camp?"

Curlfeather flicked her tail contemptuously. "So that no cat will hear us, mouse-brain," she snapped. "Don't you realize our time has come?"

Splashtail felt the irritation fade from his body, replaced by a tingle of rising excitement. "Really? Now?"

"Now," Curlfeather meowed. "Mistystar is old, and it's obvious she's getting weaker by the day. She's coming to the end of her last life. That means Reedwhisker has to die, so that I can take his place as Clan deputy and become RiverClan's next leader."

Splashtail paused for a heartbeat. He and Curlfeather had been speaking for moons about their shared disdain for their Clan's reliance on StarClan, and the need for a change. Back when he was an apprentice, Curlfeather had approached him after a particularly dramatic Gathering and slyly suggested that perhaps StarClan didn't have all the answers. Ever since then, they'd spoken privately—but with great excitement—about what it would mean to lead RiverClan in a new direction . . . if they ever got the chance. But now Curlfeather spoke about this massive change to the life of their Clan as coolly as if she were discussing where to hunt or find the best fish. He swallowed, struggling to match her self-control, then took a deep breath. "How are you going to . . . kill him?" he asked.

"*I'm* not going to kill him," the brown she-cat meowed with a twitch of her tail-tip. "You are."

For a moment all Splashtail could do was gape; he knew he must look like a frog waiting for a fly. He had believed Curlfeather had shared all her plans with him, but she had never shared this.

"We'll be sure to make it look like an accident," Curlfeather continued. "But don't you see? There must be no suspicion at all that I could have killed him—otherwise Mistystar will never choose me as deputy. I'll need to be seen with another cat when Reedwhisker dies. That means you'll have to do it, Splashtail."

The brown tabby tom felt the chill of the marshy ground rise up through his paws and fill his whole body. "I—I don't think—" he stammered.

Curlfeather's eyes narrowed. "Don't you want to see the leadership of RiverClan change? You want to be deputy, right? Ever since you were an apprentice, you've wanted power. I could sense it from fox-lengths away."

Splashtail suppressed a shiver at his Clanmate's icy tone. "Of course I want it," he assured her. "But it seems like I'm the cat who will be taking all the risks here. And . . . well, planning to be the next leader and deputy of RiverClan seemed exciting when we first started discussing it. We talked about how we would make our Clan so strong! But—"

"What's your problem, Splashtail?"

"It's just . . . well, now that the time has come, it's—Curlfeather, you expect me to *kill* our Clan's deputy. . . . What if I can't do it? Reedwhisker is a strong warrior with a lot of experience. What if *he* kills *me*?"

Curlfeather fixed him with a compelling stare. "This is no time to lose your courage," she told him. "Reedwhisker won't be on his guard in RiverClan territory. He won't expect a Clanmate to attack him. You'll easily be able to get the upper paw with a surprise attack."

As she spoke, Splashtail's shoulder fur began to bristle. *Why should Curlfeather get the real prize of becoming Clan leader?* I'm *the cat who's going to be doing all the work.* I'm *the cat who is going to be taking the risk. And I only get to be her deputy?* "But how can you even be sure that Mistystar *will* pick you as her new successor?" he continued aloud.

“I’m one of the strongest warriors in the Clan,” Curlfeather declared, giving one forepaw a complacent lick. “And Mistystar knows it. Besides, as she’s grown older, she has been much more concerned about what our ancestors think. And that’s where my kit, Frostpaw, comes in. Do you think it’s just a coincidence that she’s our new medicine-cat apprentice?”

“What do you mean?” Splashtail asked, puzzled.

“I’ve convinced Frostpaw that she’s receiving messages from StarClan,” Curlfeather explained. “Mistystar will believe Frostpaw is our Clan’s only connection to StarClan . . . and I can get *Frostpaw* to believe whatever I want her to believe.”

For a moment Splashtail was stunned into silence, that Curlfeather could speak so calmly about feeding a medicine cat false messages from their warrior ancestors, especially when that medicine cat was her daughter. The coldness of her plan appalled him to the depths of his belly, even while he was reluctantly impressed. *It’s about time some cat stood up to StarClan!* “That could work . . . ,” he murmured.

“It’s *going* to work,” Curlfeather agreed smugly. “Frostpaw is a good kit, and I understand how she thinks. Mistystar will want her medicine cats’ advice about who her new, final deputy should be, and that advice will be whoever *I* think it should be.”

“Then, when you’re deputy . . .” Splashtail felt a shiver of anticipation.

“It will be easy for me to get an apprentice assigned to you, so that you’ll be ready to become deputy in your turn. And then we won’t have to wait very long for me to become Curlstar.” She gave her tail a dismissive flick. “I doubt Mistystar will live even another moon.”

A hollow place opened up in Splashtail’s chest; he tried hard to ignore it. Mistystar had lived so long. She had been born in the old forest and made the Great Journey with the rest of the Clans. How many RiverClan cats even remembered a time when a different cat had led them?

“Then everything will change,” Curlfeather went on. “RiverClan will become the strongest Clan again. We’ll stop taking advice from dead cats and focus on the present.”

“I can’t wait,” Splashtail meowed. “Honestly, Curlfeather, I could chew my own fur off when I think that the plan depends on a medicine cat thinking StarClan wants you to be the next leader—even if it will all be faked. I don’t believe in all this listening-to-StarClan rubbish. What has StarClan ever done for me, except tell me what I can and cannot do?”

“Yes, of course. But don’t let the rest of the Clan hear you say that,” Curlfeather commented.

“Why?” Splashtail challenged her. “StarClan didn’t protect us when Darktail and his Kin invaded our territory and took over our camp. We’ll never truly recover from the damage he did. And our ancestors didn’t stop Mistystar from siding with that impostor, Ashfur. She put RiverClan lives at risk to fight for him.” He let out a contemptuous snort as Curlfeather’s gaze darkened.

“I know all that. I lived through it. And worst of all, after I’d remained loyal to Mistystar through everything, StarClan took Jayclaw from me, so that I had to raise my kits alone,” she added, her voice breaking. Then she shook herself, blinking slowly, and regarded Splashtail coolly again. “That’s when I knew something had to change. When I’m running the Clan, we’ll make our own rules, and we can encourage our medicine cats to do the same.”

“When you’re running the Clan with my assistance,” Splashtail reminded her.

“Fine,” Curlfeather meowed sharply, a glint of annoyance in her eyes. “But none of it will happen unless you keep your jaws shut and your nose clean and follow my plan.” She paused, then continued with a twitch of her tail, “You aren’t going to do all the work, you know. You’re responsible for one very important step, but I’ve been working on this plan for moons.”

“But that ‘important step’ could get me killed,” Splashtail objected.

“For StarClan’s sake, Splashtail!” Curlfeather rolled her eyes. “Do you expect the prey to leap into your mouth? Besides, it’ll be worth it,” she added more reassuringly. “I’ll make sure you have a real voice in the Clan as my deputy. And who knows? Maybe one day you’ll be Clan leader too.”

“Yeah, right,” Splashtail muttered sullenly. “I only have to wait for you to get through nine lives.”

“Save the attitude,” Curlfeather snapped. “You’re young; you could do with some time to mature before you become leader anyway,” she added tartly. “It’ll be good for you.”

Splashtail made no reply, but his eyes narrowed, and he felt a returning surge of irritation. The gift of nine lives might be the thing he resented most about StarClan. In Mistystar’s case, it meant the Clan had been stuck with a weak leader for season after season.

But it’s just like Curlfeather to on one paw say that she despises StarClan, and on the other happily take the powers they offer.

Splashtail resolved that when he was leader, he would not court StarClan’s approval. He would reject the nine lives. A cat shouldn’t need all that time to leave his Clan stronger than he found it. A strong leader should be able to do it in a single lifetime.

“So this is what you have to do.” Curlfeather’s voice broke into his thoughts. “The next time you’re on a hunting patrol with Reedwhisker, you get ahead of him when the hunters split up, and you leap out and surprise him. Maybe drop down on him from a tree. But however you kill him, make sure it looks like an accident. Remember, you’ll have to move quickly. Get away without being seen, and then we’ll pretend to know nothing about it. The Clan will mourn Reedwhisker and move on, with me as their new deputy and soon their new leader. Have you got that?”

Her condescending tone made Splashtail’s pelt prickle with irritation. “Got it,” he muttered.

Curlfeather rose to her paws. “Okay, I’m going back to camp now,” she announced. “Stay here for a few moments. The two of us shouldn’t be seen together.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned her back and stalked away. The reeds rustled once more as she brushed through them, and she was gone.

Splashtail was glad to obey; he needed time to be alone. Sitting down, he flexed his claws thoughtfully. If Curlfeather became Curlstar and accepted nine lives, she could easily outlive him, and he would never have the chance to lead the Clan. Why should he have only the power Curlfeather was willing to give her deputy, while he waited through countless moons of her leadership? He and Curlfeather thought alike on many things—that was why they had

agreed to work together—but in the end he had more faith in himself. He knew *he* could make RiverClan the strong Clan it was destined to be. Curlfeather would only be in his way.

If I'm bloodying my paws already, why stop at one cat? he thought.

Yes, he decided: Curlfeather's plan would be nearly complete, but she would never make it to the Moonpool.

RiverClan needed a different leader. A leader who would finally sever StarClan's hold on the cats he was destined to rule.

A leader like Splashtail.

Chapter 1

Crouching in the black shadow of a holly bush, Frostpaw gazed out at the assembled cats who filled the clearing beneath the Great Oak. The full moon shed silver light over the shifting patterns of fur, and over the gray-and-white tom who stood tall among the medicine cats at the foot of the tree.

Podlight? Podlight *is a medicine cat now?*

Nightheart crouched beside her, his pelt warm against hers, and Frostpaw could feel the breathing of the park cats, Wasp and Waffle, stirring her shoulder fur. But at that moment she was barely aware of them. Her heart was pounding as if it would break out of her chest, and the words that Podlight had just spoken still rang in her ears.

Podlight had announced that *Splashtail* was to be the new leader of RiverClan.

How can he lie like this?

Frostpaw didn't know whether Podlight was really supposed to be a medicine cat, but there was no way that StarClan would have chosen a murderer as her Clan's new leader. And Podlight was the littermate of her mother, Curlfeather, who she now knew had been working with Splashtail to take control of RiverClan. Could he have been in on the plan?

How will I ever convince RiverClan of the truth? she wondered despairingly. *Have I come back too late?*

Her Clanmates seemed happy and relieved that finally, after all the hardships they'd endured, they had a leader in place. Frostpaw knew that would only make it more difficult for them to accept what she had to tell them—after they had gotten over the surprise of discovering that she was still alive.

While Frostpaw's mind was still spinning like a falling sycamore seed, the cats in the clearing were reacting to Podlight's announcement. Frostpaw could see doubtful glances exchanged among the other four Clans, and she heard dubious muttering, though it was too low for her to make out any words.

Eventually Breezepelt rose to his paws from a group of WindClan warriors. His voice had a hostile edge as it rose above the general

buzz of conversation. “I’m finding it hard to believe that this new leader is any different from the cats RiverClan has put forward before.”

Splashtail dipped his head politely to the black tom. “We have a real medicine cat now,” he responded smoothly, “not like poor dead Frostpaw, who was so confused.” Frostpaw’s fur began to prickle angrily to hear herself so contemptuously dismissed. “StarClan has spoken,” Splashtail continued. “I admit that I was shocked at the honor, but I promise to serve my Clan with all the strength and wisdom that I have.”

“What’s all this about Podlight suddenly being proclaimed a medicine cat?” Ivypool sprang up from where she sat with the other Clan deputies on the roots of the Great Oak. “He’s been a warrior for a long time. Why would StarClan suddenly choose a full-grown cat to begin training?”

“Podlight isn’t the first older warrior to become a medicine cat.” Mothwing rose to her paws and faced the ThunderClan deputy. “Mudfur, who was my mentor, became a fine medicine cat after many seasons of serving RiverClan as a warrior. In fact, I trained as a warrior myself before I became a medicine cat.”

Frostpaw narrowed her eyes as she watched Ivypool sit down with a nod of acceptance.

Does Mothwing really believe that Podlight is genuinely our medicine cat?

Until now, Podlight had always been a good Clanmate. She might have believed him if she hadn’t known the truth about Splashtail. A swift shudder passed through her at the memory of sharp claws across her throat.

No other cat rose to object. Most of them seemed to share RiverClan’s relief that the Clan now had a new leader. Frostpaw half expected Tigerstar to argue, but the dark brown tabby tom simply watched the debate thoughtfully from his branch in the Great Oak.

“If StarClan grants Splashtail his nine lives,” Squirrelstar meowed, “I will welcome him as the head of RiverClan.”

Duskfur, who was sitting in the Great Oak as the acting leader of RiverClan, nodded in agreement. “It will be good to have the matter settled at last,” she declared. “I will be happy to follow Splashtail.”

His plan is working, Frostpaw thought, a chill of horror creeping over her from ears to tail-tip.

She gave a start when Nightheart nudged her; his eyes were wide with concern.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, keeping his voice low. “Should we leave quietly, before the Gathering is over? Then we could speak to each of the leaders separately and tell them what we know about Splashtail and his plans to take over RiverClan.”

Frostpaw paused, tempted by Nightheart’s suggestion. She was aware of Wasp and Waffle gazing at them both with worried eyes, waiting for her guidance. She swallowed hard, bracing herself as if she was about to plunge into battle. *I have to be brave.*

“No,” she mewed. “We need to speak up now. Splashtail *cannot* be allowed to become leader of RiverClan.”

Frostpaw sprang up. Whisking her tail for the other three cats to follow her, she launched herself into the middle of the Gathering, thrusting cats aside as she went. She was barely aware of startled exclamations breaking out behind her.

“What in StarClan—”

“Is that *Frostpaw*?”

“It can’t be!”

Every cat here thought I was dead, except Whistlepaw. What will they think now? That they’re seeing a ghost? But Frostpaw pushed the thought away. She couldn’t worry how the other cats would react; she could only worry about telling them the truth. When finally she reached the center of the crowd, she turned and faced the assembled cats. “Splashtail is lying!” she yowled.

Instantly caterwauling and gasps of shock broke out from all over the clearing. At first no cat reacted to the accusation she had just made; instead, Frostpaw realized with a mixture of amazement and gratitude, they were simply happy to see that she was alive.

Her littermates, Mistpaw and Graypaw, broke away from their Clanmates and thrust their way through the crowd until they reached her side.

“Frostpaw, it’s really you!” Graypaw exclaimed, burying his nose into her shoulder fur.

“We thought you were dead!” Mistpaw’s voice was shaking. “We thought we’d never see you again.”

Mothwing and Harelight, Frostpaw’s two mentors, approached more slowly, dipping their heads toward her and letting out purrs of welcome.

“It’s good to see you,” Mothwing meowed, giving Frostpaw’s ear a lick. “But what happened to you? Where have you been?”

“I’ll explain that later . . . ,” Frostpaw murmured.

Her anxiety faded for a moment in her delight at seeing her beloved Clanmates again. The ThunderClan cats, too, were pressing forward to welcome Nightheart, who had trailed behind her through the crowd. Frostpaw saw Sparkpelt and Finchlight exchange an incredulous glance of joy and relief, while Bayshine let out a delighted yowl. “Nightheart is back!”

Sunbeam rushed forward to touch noses with the black tom. The two cats twined their tails together, purring loudly, until Nightheart stepped back and turned once more to Frostpaw. He seemed to be waiting for her to repeat her accusation before he could concentrate on reuniting with his mate.

But Frostpaw couldn’t make herself heard over the hubbub her reappearance had caused. Cats were yowling questions at her from everywhere in the crowd.

“Why did you leave?”

“Did a fox attack you?”

“Are you okay?”

Her Clanmates were pressing around her, as if they needed to touch her to reassure themselves that she was really here—that she was real.

At last, her head spinning, Frostpaw managed to reach a clear space at the foot of the Great Oak, near the place where the deputies and medicine cats were assembled. “I know you have a lot of questions,” she began, raising her voice to be heard above the noise of the crowd. “And I will answer all of them—but first you have to listen to me.” She paused for a heartbeat; then, after taking in a huge breath, she let out a yowl that carried across the clearing. “I have spoken with StarClan! RiverClan, you are making a terrible

mistake. You cannot trust Splashtail. He must *not* become leader of RiverClan."

For a heartbeat every cat was silent and as still as if they had been frozen. Then objections were hurled thick and fast at Frostpaw, sharp and stinging as hailstones.

"What? You're not even a medicine cat!" her own Clanmate Sneezecloud exclaimed.

"Yeah," Breezeheart agreed. "You aren't able to speak to StarClan. You admitted that yourself."

The clamor grew louder as cats from the other Clans joined in. Frostpaw managed to stay upright, her head held high, as she was buffeted by the storm of protest. Eventually Tigerstar padded to the end of his branch and raised his tail for silence.

"First of all, Frostpaw," he began when he could make himself heard, "I'd like to know where you have been. And who are these strange cats that you've brought to our Gathering?"

"I'll tell you all you want to know," Frostpaw responded, relieved by the ShadowClan leader's reasonable tone. "But the most important thing you have to know right *now* is that StarClan showed me the truth about everything that's happened in RiverClan."

She paused, daunted by the enormity of what she had to reveal. Hesitant, she exchanged a glance with Nightheart, who gave her a firm nod as though he was telling her, *Go ahead, say it.*

Her courage renewed, Frostpaw gazed out across the heaving assembly of cats. "Splashtail murdered Reedwhisker," she announced.

The stunned silence that followed Frostpaw's accusation gave her the chance to continue before any cat could challenge her.

"Splashtail and my mother, Curlfeather—" It was hard for Frostpaw to keep her voice steady as she admitted her mother's involvement in something so terrible. "The two of them conspired to murder Reedwhisker so that they could take control of RiverClan."

As she fought to speak the accusation, Frostpaw became aware of Splashtail staring at her from where he stood with his Clanmates. The gaze he fixed on her was icy with fury; Frostpaw couldn't see any trace of the cat she had believed was her friend—the cat she had once wanted to be her mate.

“But Splashtail wasn’t satisfied with merely being Curlfeather’s deputy,” she continued, her tone determined now. “He turned on her, and led the dogs to where he knew she would be, so they would kill her. When StarClan showed me the truth about Reedwhisker, I told Splashtail about it—and he tried to kill me as well.”

As she finished speaking, Frostpaw spared a glance at her littermates, who were gazing at her in horror. She knew how confused they must feel to hear her accusing their mother. If they believed her, they must be devastated.

While Frostpaw paused, the outcry broke out again. It took all her courage not to flinch under the hostile glares that were directed at her.

“Why should we believe you?” Hawkwing, the SkyClan deputy, demanded.

“Every cat knows you were never a real medicine cat,” Poppyfrost hissed.

“And if that wasn’t enough, you ran away!” Scorchfur added.

Like Tigerstar, Duskfur rose from her place in the Great Oak and gazed down at Frostpaw.

“We need you to explain,” she meowed. Frostpaw was thankful that she sounded stern but at least prepared to listen. “Why did you leave instead of telling the rest of your Clan?” Duskfur continued. “There was evidence that you were dead!”

“I didn’t know which cat had tried to kill me,” Frostpaw explained. “I had suspicions, but I didn’t know for sure until StarClan showed me, so I didn’t know which cats I could trust. As far as I knew, it could have been any cat in my Clan.”

A shocked hiss came from Icewing; Frostpaw could see that many of her Clanmates were gazing at her, deeply offended at her failure to trust them. She felt her belly lurch with guilt as she saw the hurt on Harelight’s face, as if her mentor was asking, *Couldn’t you have come to me?*

“Then who *did* you trust?” Mothwing asked. “Some cat must have helped you. Was it Nightheart? I wasn’t even aware that you knew each other, but it seems that Nightheart left the Clans with you.”

“No—that was later,” Frostpaw stammered. “StarClan brought us together for the journey.”

This was the moment when she should have mentioned Whistlepaw, but she didn't want to get the WindClan medicine-cat apprentice into trouble. She fell silent, her claws working in and out.

Before Frostpaw could decide what to say, Whistlepaw stepped forward from her place beside her mentor, Kestrelflight. She looked scared but resolute, her glance flicking from Mothwing to Frostpaw and back again.

"I found Frostpaw on WindClan's territory," she began. "She'd been attacked by . . . something. She had a terrible neck injury." With her tail she pointed toward Frostpaw's neck, where the scar was still visible. "Frostpaw seemed to have ideas about who did it, but she wouldn't tell me who it was. She was really scared, and she begged me not to tell any cat."

"I don't *believe* this," Kestrelflight muttered. "What in the name of StarClan were you *thinking*?"

"I treated her as best I could," Whistlepaw continued, avoiding her mentor's question, "and I helped her get to the horseplace, where she could rest and recover."

"That doesn't make sense," Kestrelflight objected. "Frostpaw would never have survived a wound meant to kill her, unless you stayed with her."

"Smoky the horseplace cat helped," Frostpaw explained, anxious that Kestrelflight might suspect his apprentice was lying. "He showed me to his Twolegs, and they took me to a Twoleg medicine cat. That's how I was healed."

Kestrelflight blinked in surprise but said nothing, merely nodding at his apprentice to continue.

"After that," Whistlepaw went on, "I took some of Frostpaw's fur and put it with the blood in the place where she was attacked. I told every cat that a fox had taken her. I thought it was the best way to make sure she was safe."

Kestrelflight was gazing at his apprentice with narrowed eyes that promised a reckoning later. Harestar was also looking down at her with deep disappointment in his expression. "You have misled your Clan," he told Whistlepaw sternly. "And all the other Clans, for which I offer every cat at this Gathering my deepest apologies. Be assured that this apprentice will be punished."

Whistlepaw ducked her head, regretfully accepting her Clan leader's decision, while Frostpaw's pelt prickled with guilt that her friend was in trouble for helping her.

There was a brief silence as every cat took in the story that Whistlepaw had told; it was broken by Leafstar.

"That does not prove that Splashtail did anything to Frostpaw," the SkyClan leader pointed out in measured tones. "All it proves is that she was injured and chose to leave the Clans. Frostpaw's own story states that she didn't see who attacked her. She claims that StarClan only told her this afterward. And we mustn't forget that in the past she said she was mistaken about speaking with StarClan."

"Frostpaw, do you have any proof of what you're saying, even now?" Duskfur asked. Her voice was stern, and Frostpaw's hope died that she would find any support here. "You led us astray with your supposed visions before." With a sigh she added, "I find it impossible to believe that Curlfeather would ever have done such a thing. You must surely be mistaken."

Frostpaw could see grief and sympathy in the old she-cat's eyes. "I know you don't want to believe something so terrible about your daughter," Frostpaw meowed. "But Curlfeather was my mother, and I didn't want to believe it either. I wouldn't be saying this now unless I knew that it was true. Nightheart, you believe me, don't you?" she asked.

Nightheart took a step forward so that he stood at Frostpaw's shoulder. "Yes, I believe you," he responded. To Duskfur he added, "It was clear to me that Frostpaw was seeing visions, and then StarClan led us to a safe place."

"And who exactly appeared to you from StarClan?" Mothwing asked. She sounded as though she wanted to believe Frostpaw. *Maybe she doesn't trust Splashtail either,* Frostpaw thought, a faint tingle of hope in her chest.

"I saw Riverstar, the first leader of our Clan," she meowed. "He was wonderful—so wise and kind—and he showed me the truth."

Even as she spoke, she could see that most of the assembled cats didn't believe her, glancing uneasily at one another and exchanging dubious mutters.

"What do the medicine cats think?" Tigerstar asked.

“It sounds like she could have had real visions,” Alderheart murmured, though he didn’t seem certain.

“None of us have ever spoken with Riverstar,” Frecklewish pointed out, “so how can we be sure?”

“We can never be sure of any vision we receive from StarClan,” Puddleshine argued. “Yet we follow the wisdom they give us all the time.”

“And Riverstar isn’t the first cat she would think of if she was lying,” Mothwing pointed out. “She would be more likely to choose a more recent StarClan warrior.”

To her dismay, Frostpaw saw that Duskfur didn’t look convinced, even in spite of Mothwing’s reasoning. “I still can’t believe that Curlfeather might have done those things you’re accusing her of,” she mewed unhappily. “I know she was shaken by Jayclaw’s death, but to do something so evil? Is it possible that you’re confused about StarClan like you were before?”

“No, I’m sure—” Frostpaw began, but Duskfur continued without listening to her answer.

“Podlight’s vison about Splashtail is RiverClan’s chance to find stability again,” she asserted, “and I’m reluctant to let you challenge that when you have no proof. And why did you leave the Clans, Frostpaw, instead of bringing your concerns to some of your Clanmates? If you thought there was a murderer in our midst, why didn’t you think it was important enough to warn us? Surely you didn’t believe that every cat was against you, even your own kin?”

Frostpaw struggled to find the words to answer the older she-cat. “The last words Curlfeather said to me were ‘Trust no cat,’” she replied at last. “I know I don’t have definite proof against Splashtail, but if you could have seen the visions Riverstar showed me, you would understand.”

“Your visions can’t be real if you can’t explain them to us,” Duskfur responded. “And there’s no other reason for us to think that Splashtail has ever been anything other than a loyal RiverClan cat.”

All this while, Splashtail had been hanging back, fixing Frostpaw with a look of indignation and hurt. Now he stepped forward. “I did not kill Reedwhisker or Curlfeather,” he declared, “and I certainly never attacked Frostpaw.”

Frostpaw felt her shoulder fur begin to bristle. “How dare you stand there and lie like that?” she demanded. “You—”

“That’s enough,” Duskfur interrupted. “Every cat has listened to you, Frostpaw, and now Splashtail has the right to defend himself.”

The brown tabby tom let his gaze sweep around the cats assembled in the clearing. It was so quiet they could have heard a pinecone fall. He drew himself up into a noble stance, and his green eyes were full of remorse. To her horror, Frostpaw realized that he was impressive enough to convince most of his listeners.

“It’s true that I knew Curlfeather was manipulating the cats around her—including Frostpaw—to try to install herself as leader,” he confessed.

“What?” Duskfur was taken aback by his words, her tone thoroughly upset. “Why didn’t you tell any of us?”

Splashtail dipped his head in acknowledgment of the older cat’s dismay. “I only realized the truth shortly before Curlfeather died,” he explained. “I heard her talking in her sleep in the warriors’ den. I didn’t tell any cat because I was trying to find proof. Then, when Curlfeather died, I saw no point in adding to the Clan’s grief by revealing her treachery. I have too much respect for her kin to hurt them for no reason.”

“Even after she killed Reedwhisker?” Tigerstar asked.

“I didn’t know until now that she had,” Splashtail replied. “If she even did. Remember that she was manipulating Frostpaw to believe that she was a medicine cat. Who knows how being used by a cat—her own mother, who she should have been able to trust—has affected Frostpaw? At first she thought she was a medicine cat, and then she changed her mind and started training as a warrior. She named more than one new leader of RiverClan, and got it wrong every time. And now she claims she knew there was a murderer in our midst, but she didn’t feel the need to warn any of us.” Frostpaw cringed as his voice grew heavy with false sympathy. “The poor cat is confused. She clearly doesn’t know what’s real and what isn’t anymore.”

“I never said Curlfeather killed Reedwhisker!” Frostpaw objected hotly. “It was you! Curlfeather—”

“Splashtail,” Duskfur interrupted, speaking over Frostpaw’s protest, “if you knew that Curlfeather was tricking the rest of our Clan in an attempt to become leader, why didn’t you speak out? That was too important for you to keep secret just out of respect.”

“I was pretending to be her ally,” Splashtail explained, his voice dripping with sincerity and regret. “But all the while I was working against her. That’s one reason I spent so much time with Frostpaw, trying to counteract what her mother was doing to her.” He paused to give his chest fur an embarrassed lick. “Sometimes I think Frostpaw got the wrong idea about what was between us,” he confessed. “Maybe that’s why she’s so confused now . . . I can understand if she’s angry with me.”

Outrage flooded over Frostpaw. *No, I didn’t get the wrong idea! You agreed we would be mates one day!* But she could tell that Splashtail’s quiet, reasonable tone was influencing the other cats in his favor. Her fur grew hot with shame as she spotted several pitying glances directed at her. *Is that all they think of me?*

“I think this matter is settled for now.” Duskfur’s voice rang out strongly across the clearing. “These are serious charges, but we need to discuss them within RiverClan, without involving the other Clans any further. Tigerstar, this is the time for you to remove your last warriors from RiverClan and leave us alone.”

“I agree,” Leafstar declared. “I see no reason for any cat to go on arguing—especially as my Clanmate, Tree, worked hard to mediate these disputes. RiverClan believes it has its new leader, and the rest of us have to give Splashtail the benefit of the doubt as he goes to the Moonpool to get his nine lives. I’m sorry for what Frostpaw has gone through, but her own Clan can deal with that now.”

Frostpaw was stunned. The whole clearing seemed to spin around her, and for a moment she was afraid she would fall to the ground. The park cats stood staunchly beside her, purring their support, while Nightheart’s shoulder was warm against hers, supporting her until the feeling passed.

At least they’re still my allies.

Splashtail, now that he was accepted as leader, leaped up into the branches of the Great Oak and stood looking down at the cats

beneath him. His gaze met Frostpaw's; she was amazed that he could look so compassionate.

Hypocrite!

"I'm sorry, but I can't welcome Frostpaw back into RiverClan," he meowed. "I'm trying to strengthen the Clan, and she's trying to pull it apart."

Frostpaw felt a jolt as if a rock had hit her in the belly. The other RiverClan cats were glancing at each other, exchanging shocked murmurs. The leaders in the Great Oak looked equally disturbed.

It was Squirrelstar who spoke. "Splashtail, are you sure about this?" she asked. "I understand that Frostpaw has made some serious accusations here, accusations that may cause pain and conflict within RiverClan. Still, it's a big step to send a cat into exile."

"I *am* sure," Splashtail replied, full of confidence as he faced the ThunderClan leader. "Besides, I think it will be better for Frostpaw to get some distance from everything that's troubling her. Maybe it will help clear her head."

"My head is perfectly clear, thank you," Frostpaw snapped. "And you can't banish me—not without the Clan's support."

"But I *have* that support," Splashtail responded, his voice as silky as a kit's fur. "Can't you see that?"

When Frostpaw turned to her Clanmates, she felt a trembling well up inside her. From the RiverClan cats' expressions, she could see that Splashtail was right. Although a few of them, especially Mistpaw and Graypaw, looked worried and bewildered, no cat would meet her gaze. And no cat spoke up to defend her, not even her own kin.

So where am I to go? Frostpaw asked herself. She had known that she was taking a huge risk by speaking her accusations out loud, but somehow she'd never imagined this. She had traveled so far, and gone through so much, all to save her Clan, but they had rejected her anyway. She had expected at least some of her Clanmates to believe her, to be on her side. But not one had come forward. *What now?*

Could she join another Clan? It was unimaginable. She wondered what life would be like as a loner, or whether she might travel back to the park. She knew she would be welcome there, but the thought of

the long journey made her paws feel sore and every hair in her pelt droop with exhaustion.

“Frostpaw has to stay somewhere,” Nightheart pointed out, his fur beginning to bristle angrily. “She’s a Clan cat, not some rogue who just wandered in. Squirrelstar, will you give her a place in ThunderClan?”

“Well . . . ,” Squirrelstar began, clearly hesitant.

Tigerstar snorted. “So much for helpful, noble ThunderClan,” he snapped. “What, you’ve chosen this moment *not* to stick your nose in another Clan’s business? If you won’t take Frostpaw in, I will.”

“So you believe me?” Frostpaw asked, shuddering in the relief that rushed through her from ears to paws. Squirrelstar flicked her ear in annoyance and turned away.

“I’m not sure what to believe,” Tigerstar told her. “But until we know for sure, I won’t have you fending for yourself without the support of at least one Clan, even if it is not your own.”

Frostpaw dipped her head to the ShadowClan leader in astonished gratitude, but before she could speak, Duskfur cut in, her tone furious and her tail lashing.

“Oh, how kind of you, Tigerstar!” she exclaimed, a sarcastic edge to her voice. “Will you stop at nothing to undermine RiverClan?”

Tigerstar bared his teeth at the RiverClan she-cat, but it was Squirrelstar who spoke, clearly trying to avoid a fight that would break the Gathering truce.

“I was reluctant to take in Frostpaw myself,” she admitted, “but I think Tigerstar is doing the right thing. Frostpaw was a loyal RiverClan apprentice, and we don’t know enough to be sure she’s lying. She should stay close to us while we see what happens to Splashtail.” She cast a glance at the young tabby tom, who had settled on a branch just above her head. “Will StarClan give him nine lives?” she asked. Then she shrugged. “Who can predict that? But if StarClan refuses, that will be a pretty clear judgment on which cat is telling the truth here.”

Knowing Splashtail so well, Frostpaw understood that the slight twitch of his left ear indicated that he was displeased at Squirrelstar’s words. But he said nothing, only acknowledging her with a polite dip of his head.

“What about us?” Waffle called from where he stood a pace behind Frostpaw. He and Wasp had been whispering to each other while the argument raged on. “We’ve come all this way to join RiverClan.”

“That’s right,” Wasp agreed. “We’ve heard stories about its first leader, Riverstar, since we were young kits. Frostpaw brought us here because we wanted to be part of the Clan he founded.”

“But we’re not even sure if we want that now,” Waffle went on. “Not when RiverClan is treating Frostpaw so poorly.”

“Frostpaw had no right to make promises,” Duskfur growled. “Especially not to bring outsiders into the Clans. Where have they come from, anyway?”

“From a Twoleg park,” Nightheart explained. “That’s the safe place where Riverstar led us. Wasp and Waffle and many other cats lived there. They’re almost like a Clan.”

“We learned so much while we were there,” Frostpaw added, remembering all the time she had spent in peaceful meditation and her meetings with RiverClan’s first leader. “It was wonderful.”

Podlight snorted. “Then maybe you should have stayed there.”

There was a nasty pause. Frostpaw lashed her tail, trying to forget that Podlight was her mother’s littermate—like Duskfur, her own kin. *Have I really been awful enough to be rejected by my own family?* But she remembered how hard it had been for her to accept that her own mother had been working against the Clan; they, too, must be angered by the truth. *And I have a home in ShadowClan,* Frostpaw reminded herself, *for now.*

Meanwhile, most of the gathered cats seemed to be trying hard not to meet the gazes of the two park cats.

“I know Wasp and Waffle are loyal and courageous,” Nightheart meowed at last. “Squirrelstar, may *they* come as guests to ThunderClan, just for now?”

Frostpaw detected a slight nervousness in Nightheart’s voice, and realized that this must be the first time he had spoken to Squirrelstar as his Clan leader.

The ThunderClan leader hesitated for a moment, then gave a brisk nod. “They may.”

The two park cats dipped their heads in gratitude, and Nightheart too bowed in respect and thanks to his leader.

As soon as Squirrelstar had spoken, Tigerstar raised his head and announced, “This Gathering is over.”

At once cats began to head across the clearing and push their way through the bushes toward the shore and the tree-bridge. Frostpaw saw Sparkpelt and Finchlight greet Nightheart and briefly touch noses with him before joining their Clanmates. Sunbeam stood waiting for Nightheart until his mother and sister moved on, and the rest of the ThunderClan cats streamed past them.

“Are you okay going to ShadowClan?” Nightheart asked Frostpaw.

“I’ll be fine, thanks,” she replied, though she wasn’t sure that was true. She had never lived in a Clan that wasn’t RiverClan. Nightheart had briefly lived in ShadowClan when he’d tried to change Clans for Sunbeam, but she barely knew anything about ShadowClan, besides the fact that they had invaded RiverClan when she had failed to choose a leader. In RiverClan, Tigerstar and his cats had been the enemy.

Nightheart touched his nose to her ear. “Tigerstar isn’t so bad, I promise. I’ll see you at the next Gathering. But if there’s any trouble before then, you can send me a message.”

Frostpaw dipped her head in thanks and watched as Nightheart padded over to Sunbeam and brushed his pelt against hers while they followed their Clanmates out of the clearing. In spite of all that had happened, Frostpaw was pleased for him; she knew how much he had missed his mate, and how guilty he had felt about leaving her so soon after she had abandoned her own Clan to join him in ThunderClan.

I feel so bad about delaying him, Frostpaw thought. *Especially now, when this Gathering was such a disaster.*

Wasp and Waffle exchanged a confused glance, holding back as if they were reluctant to follow the ThunderClan cats.

“Go on, you’ll be okay,” Frostpaw reassured them. “I know they aren’t RiverClan, but ThunderClan cats are good cats, mostly.”

Neither of the park cats looked as if they believed her. “Goodbye, then, Frostpaw,” Waffle meowed. “I know Riverstar will take care of

you.”

Wasp murmured agreement, and the two cats bounded across the clearing to catch up with Nightheart and Sunbeam.

Frostpaw stood watching as the RiverClan cats—her Clanmates and her kin—turned away from her and made their way through the bushes. Several of them glanced back at her with worried or hostile eyes, but none of them, not even her littermates, spoke to her.

When they were gone, Frostpaw turned to where the ShadowClan medicine cats, Puddleshine and Shadowsight, were beckoning to her from their place beside the roots of the Great Oak. Neither cat had ever been hostile toward her, but it took all her courage to make her paws carry her to join them.

“Welcome,” Puddleshine meowed. “Don’t worry; I think it’s great that you’re coming to ShadowClan.”

Shadowsight let out a purr and rubbed his cheek against hers. “It will all be okay in the end,” he assured her, his voice warm and friendly. “The truth will come out.”

As Frostpaw followed him and the rest of the ShadowClan cats toward the shore of the Gathering island, she could only hope that was true.

Chapter 2

Nightheart pressed his muzzle against Sunbeam's face and breathed in her sweet scent. A purr rose up in his chest; happiness surged through his body from his ears to his claws.

"I've missed you so much," he mewed. "Every day away from you felt like a moon."

They stood with the crowd of their Clanmates on the shore of the Gathering island, waiting for WindClan to finish crossing the tree-bridge.

"Are you angry with me for leaving you right before your trials to join ThunderClan?" Nightheart asked; his pelt prickled nervously as he waited for her reply. "I would understand if you were. I was afraid you might not want to stay, when I was gone for so long."

Sunbeam let out a purr. "Of course not, you stupid furball," she mewed affectionately. "Don't get me wrong. I did miss you, and part of me wondered if I really had a place in ThunderClan without you here." When Nightheart opened his mouth to say something, Sunbeam rushed to add, "But I know now that I do. And I understand that you had to go when StarClan needed you. I'm proud of you."

Nightheart felt relief flood his pelt. "I was worried—" he began.

"You didn't have to be," Sunbeam interrupted. "I'm just glad you're alive. And your kin have really welcomed me into ThunderClan. I feel like I belong there now." She paused, then added mischievously, "You haven't asked me if I *passed* my trials."

"No need," Nightheart responded. "I know you did."

"Well, they weren't all that hard," Sunbeam told him. "Nothing like what Berryheart put you through in ShadowClan." Her tail curled up in amusement. "Would you believe I had to teach kits to hunt? They—"

She broke off as Ivypool called out from the end of the tree-bridge. "Are you two coming? Or do you want to stand there gossiping all night?"

Nightheart gave a start, realizing that the rest of ThunderClan had crossed the bridge, leaving only him and Sunbeam and the park cats on the island shore. "Sorry, Ivypool," he meowed.

Beckoning to Wasp and Waffle with his tail, he scrambled through the tree roots and led the way across the tree trunk onto RiverClan territory. The RiverClan cats had vanished, but he could still make out Squirrelstar and the rest of ThunderClan trekking along the lakeshore toward their own territory. Picking up the pace, with Sunbeam at his side, he headed for home.

The night was still dark, with not even the first faint tinge of dawn visible in the sky, by the time Nightheart and the rest of his Clan reached the stone hollow. Everything was quiet in the camp. Lilyheart, who was on watch, was giving herself a thorough grooming as the cats who had been to the Gathering slipped through the thorn tunnel.

When she spotted Nightheart, she sprang to her paws, joy flooding into her face. “Nightheart!” she exclaimed. “Is it really you?”

Nightheart touched noses with his former mentor, happy to see her again and hear how enthusiastically she greeted him.

“It’s really me,” he responded. “I’m home.”

“Cats of ThunderClan!” Lilyheart let out a long caterwaul. “Wake up! Nightheart is back!”

Thriftear poked her head out of the warriors’ den, blinking away sleep, then let out a screech. “Nightheart!” She shot out of the den and hurled herself across the camp, still yowling as she bounded toward him. “ThunderClan! Come and see! Nightheart’s really back!”

Cinderheart slipped out from between the branches of the den, followed by more of the ThunderClan cats. Within moments Nightheart was surrounded by a crowd of his Clanmates, pressing around him and letting out purrs of welcome.

“We were all afraid we’d never see you again!” Spotfur exclaimed, while her kits bounced around Nightheart, letting out joyful squeaks.

“Nightheart is tough.” Bayshine wriggled his way through the crowd of returning warriors to Nightheart’s side. “I knew you’d be okay,” he added. “And so much has happened while you were away! Sunbeam did her three tasks, and she was *awesome*! She—”

“But who are these two?” Bumblestripe interrupted, turning his head to stare suspiciously at the park cats. “Why are you bringing

strange cats back into camp with you?”

“Yeah, like we don’t have enough mouths to feed,” Thornclaw grumbled.

“Well, *you* won’t be feeding them,” Nightheart retorted, glaring at the tabby elder. He could see that Wasp and Waffle had drawn closer together, exchanging a nervous glance as if they expected to be driven out of ThunderClan. “Both these cats know how to hunt. I helped train them myself. And if you must know, Squirrelflight—I mean Squirrelstar—invited them, so you can keep your fur on!”

While he was speaking, Brambleclaw approached from the leader’s den and dipped his head to Nightheart in welcome. “It’s good to see you again,” he meowed. The former leader still carried some of the weariness that had eventually convinced him to give up his responsibilities for the good of the Clan, but his amber gaze no longer looked as haunted as it once had.

“I’m so glad to be home,” Nightheart responded, thankful for the warmth of Brambleclaw’s greeting. “I’ve missed you all, but I had to help Frostpaw.”

“Frostpaw?” Brambleclaw blinked. “I can see you have a story to tell.”

“And we need to hear it,” Squirrelstar declared, appearing at Brambleclaw’s shoulder. Nightheart’s belly lurched with anxiety at the thought of being questioned by the new Clan leader. “But not right now,” Squirrelstar added. “It’s late. Morning will come soon enough, and we can talk through everything then. You head for your nest.”

Happy to obey her, Nightheart and Sunbeam led Wasp and Waffle to the warriors’ den and dragged moss and bracken together to make nests for them. Once the park cats were settled, the two warriors were able to go to their own nests, side by side.

As he curled up in the warm bedding, Nightheart began to relax for what felt like the first time in moons. Sunbeam’s tail brushed along his flank as she nestled close to him.

This all feels so right, he thought contentedly. He’d been close to Sunbeam before, but this was the first time they were together in the warriors’ den with Sunbeam as a full member of the Clan. StarClan giving them the right leader on top of that seemed almost too good to

be true. He remembered being so unsure about ThunderClan that he'd wanted to leave, but now things couldn't be better.

"I'm so happy to be with you again," he murmured—both to ThunderClan and to Sunbeam—as he slipped into sleep.

The sound of Ivypool calling together the dawn patrol woke Nightheart. Beside him, Sunbeam was stirring too. Feeling that he hadn't slept for nearly long enough, Nightheart rose and blundered out into the open, where he shook the scraps of moss and fur from his pelt. Sunbeam followed him, yawning, then arched her back in a good long stretch.

When the patrol—Bumblestripe, Honeyfur, and Stormcloud—had disappeared through the thorn tunnel, Ivypool came padding over to Nightheart and Sunbeam.

"Good, you're awake," she mewed briskly. "Squirrelstar wants to see you. Follow me."

Nightheart touched noses with Sunbeam before heading off in the Clan deputy's paw steps. He took in huge gulps of the chilly dawn air, trying to wake up properly, as he climbed the tumbled rocks to Squirrelstar's den on the Highledge.

The Clan leader was sitting in her nest, and Ivypool took up a position beside her, gesturing with her tail for Nightheart to sit facing them.

"Okay, Nightheart," Squirrelstar meowed. "Just tell your story. I'll ask questions if I need to."

Nightheart dipped his head and launched into the account of how he had met Frostpaw near the Moonpool and agreed to travel with her. StarClan had led her to the park, and they'd found a group of cats living there who still spoke of Riverstar.

"They know about Riverstar?" Ivypool's tone was astonished. "From so long ago?"

"They do," Nightheart told her. "Of course none of the living cats have ever met him, but his story is an important legend for them, just as it is for RiverClan—though I don't think any of them have communed with him the way our medicine cats would. Frostpaw spoke to him many times on our journey," he added, suppressing a pulse of anger at the way her own Clan had dismissed her.

“So what sort of place is this ‘park’ you’re talking about?” Squirrelstar asked. “Is it the cats’ territory?”

“Sort of,” Nightheart explained. “It’s a big open area, with grass and trees and bushes, but it’s . . . it’s tamed, as if Twolegs made it. Not wild like our forest here. The Twolegs know about the cats there, because they bring food for them.”

“*Twolegs* feed them?” Ivypool curled her lips back in disgust. “They’re kittypets, then. Nightheart, have you brought a couple of kittypets into our Clan?”

Nightheart shook his head vigorously. “No, they’re not kittypets. They don’t go into Twoleg dens. And some of them hunt for themselves.”

“So what do they do all day?” Ivypool still didn’t sound pleased. “They don’t all hunt, and it doesn’t sound as if they need to know how to defend themselves.”

“Well . . .” Nightheart was sure this wasn’t going to go down well. “They meditate.”

Ivypool opened her jaws for what was bound to be a scathing remark, but Squirrelstar flicked her tail for silence. “Explain, please, Nightheart.”

“Meditating is a way of sitting and thinking—really deeply—until you start understanding things clearly,” Nightheart replied. “It’s useful when you have a really big decision to make. Frostpaw got so good at it; she could explain it much better than I can.”

“Sitting and thinking.” Squirrelstar sighed. “Wouldn’t it be great if I had the time to do that? Go on, Nightheart.”

“While we were in the park, Frostpaw spoke to Riverstar in her dreams. When she was ready, he showed her how Curlfeather had plotted with Splashtail to betray their Clan.”

Squirrelstar and Ivypool exchanged a concerned glance. None of this was news to them, because they had heard what Frostpaw had said at the Gathering. But Nightheart could see that hearing it here, in the heart of their own Clan, with time to think about what it meant, made it much more worrying.

“How much do you trust Frostpaw?” Squirrelstar asked.

“Very much.” Nightheart hoped that his belief in Frostpaw would help his Clan leader and deputy believe in her. He had spent so

much time with her, and he knew how honest she was, even when it would have been easier to lie. She had been so kind and fair with the park cats, too. “And I’m very sure that she’s right,” he continued. “Splashtail has killed and manipulated his way into a position of power, and I think that ThunderClan and the other Clans need to help stop him. Squirrelstar, we have to do something!”

Squirrelstar let out a heavy sigh. “In my heart, as Squirrelflight, I believe you,” she meowed. “There’s something wrong with Splashtail, and something rotten has been happening in RiverClan since Mistystar’s death.”

“Then—”

Once again, the new Clan leader lifted her tail for silence. “On the other paw, as Squirrel*star*, I can’t agree that the other Clans have to step in and stop Splashtail. Not even if you’re right about Frostpaw, Nightheart.”

Nightheart couldn’t understand what she meant. *Why can’t Squirrelstar see that we can’t let an evil cat like Splashtail have control over a Clan?*

“ThunderClan has often attracted the ire of other Clans for meddling in their affairs,” Squirrelstar explained, as if Nightheart had spoken his question aloud. “My father had the respect of all the Clans, but even with that, some cats did not like how often he’d stick his muzzle in. And I’m a new leader, who has yet to earn even a scrap of the respect he had. I have to place the safety of ThunderClan above my anger at Splashtail’s treachery, until the other Clans learn to trust me. Besides,” she added, “we have just amended the warrior code to say that a leader can be ousted, but only if the majority of their Clan wants that and the other Clans agree. At present RiverClan is standing behind Splashtail, so going against them would be breaking the new code.”

“Sooner or later, evil in RiverClan will spread to us and the other Clans too,” Ivypool pointed out.

Squirrelstar nodded. “That is true . . . but we aren’t there yet. RiverClan is not ours to control. With no more proof than Frostpaw’s word, we would be putting our own will above RiverClan’s wishes if we attacked Splashtail. That’s what got Tigerstar into trouble and almost brought the Clans to war.” She paused, her green eyes alight

with thought, then continued, “A huge part of me *does* want to send warriors into RiverClan and defend what is right. But . . . I can’t do that. No, we’ll wait and see how this plays out. I believe Frostpaw is telling the truth, but RiverClan has to come to believe it, too.”

“But that could take seasons!” Nightheart protested.

Squirrelstar shook her head. “No, it won’t,” she mewed firmly. “Do you think StarClan will give a cat like Splashtail their approval and his nine lives? If they don’t—*when* they don’t—I suspect his plan will fall apart pretty fast.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Ivypool’s voice was grim. “What about Brokenstar? Or the first Tigerstar? It’s clear StarClan doesn’t have a problem giving nine lives to murderous cats, as long as the Clan’s previous leader is dead.”

Squirrelstar winced. “That may be true. I’d like to think that RiverClan’s ancestors would speak up to prevent it, though.”

Ivypool looked skeptical. “Well, we can hope. But that’s not the only way things could go wrong. Suppose Splashtail goes to the Moonpool and *lies* about what happens? We’ve all heard the story of Nightpelt, when ShadowClan was without a leader. He went to the Moonpool, but StarClan refused to give him nine lives, because Brokenstar was still alive, even though he was in exile. He never told that to his Clan, and he led them as Nightstar until he died.”

“Yes, I know the story,” Squirrelstar responded. “But Nightstar lied to help his Clan. He wasn’t a vicious mange-pelt like Splashtail.”

“All the more reason to believe Splashtail would tell the same lie,” Ivypool meowed. “For StarClan’s sake, Owlnose almost did it, except that he’s such a terrible liar he gave himself away. Squirrelstar, we can’t just ignore this.”

“I’m not ignoring it,” Squirrelstar murmured, blinking thoughtfully. Then she shook her head. “No, the first move has to come from within RiverClan.”

Nightheart could understand his leader’s thinking, but he was disappointed that she would not take action. He felt that Squirrelstar was underestimating how deceptive and dangerous Splashtail could be, and he was worried about what the false leader might be up to in RiverClan.

I hope he won't start threatening the other Clans, or try to take revenge on Frostpaw.

But although he had expected a different decision, he trusted Squirrelstar. She was probably right: RiverClan would decide the outcome for themselves, especially if StarClan refused to give Splashtail its blessing.

I just hope it happens before Splashtail does much more damage.

Squirrelstar rose from her nest and led the way out onto the Highledge. Below in the camp, Nightheart spotted Wasp and Waffle venturing cautiously out of the warriors' den. Sunbeam was with them; she showed them the fresh-kill pile and encouraged them to take a piece of prey.

"I'm sorry for bringing outsiders into Clan territory without permission," he told Squirrelstar. "Frostpaw and I were planning for them to go to RiverClan, but since Frostpaw wasn't able to go back . . . They're good cats, really," he assured his new leader. "They're hard workers who would make loyal Clanmates."

"I'm not blaming you, Nightheart," Squirrelstar responded, her gaze fixed on the newcomers below. "I understand how it happened. I'm willing to have them as ThunderClan guests for now, but if they want to stay much longer, they'll have to prove their worth, and that they truly wish to be ThunderClan cats. I'm not planning on filling the bellies of outsiders forever."

Pacing forward to the edge of the Highledge, she raised her voice in a commanding yowl. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here below the Highledge for a Clan meeting."

Instantly cats began to appear from the warriors' den, with Bayshine and Finchlight in the lead, gathering and gazing up at Squirrelstar, their eyes bright with curiosity. Brambleclaw led the other elders into the open and found a place to sit near the fresh-kill pile. Alderheart and Jayfeather brushed past the brambles that screened the medicine cats' den and sat down just outside; Jayfeather raised one paw to scratch his ear vigorously. Spotfur and Daisy appeared from the nursery, while Spotfur's kits plopped down beside their mother in a heap of wriggling fur.

“We’re all pleased to have Nightheart back,” Squirrelstar announced when the Clan was assembled. “And we welcome Wasp and Waffle as guests in our Clan. Wasp, Waffle, I know that when you traveled to meet the Clans, you never expected to come to ThunderClan, but what are you planning now?”

The park cats exchanged an apprehensive glance. Nightheart could understand how they would be hesitant to speak in front of a Clan of strangers.

Sunbeam gave Waffle an encouraging nudge, and the tabby tom spoke up. “We planned to join RiverClan because we had heard so much about Riverstar. He lived with our ancestors many seasons ago, and we still remember him and talk about him.”

“ThunderClan seems very nice,” Wasp added anxiously. “We’d like to do whatever we can to help out while we’re here. But we’re not sure what we ought to do eventually.”

“I don’t think we want to go back to the park, do we?” Waffle turned to Wasp, and the brown tom shook his head.

Ivypool rose to her paws with a friendly nod at the two park cats. “Things are unsettled in RiverClan at present,” she told them. “But eventually you might be allowed to join.”

“You’re welcome guests for now,” Squirrelstar added, “but in a moon or so, by the time of the next Gathering, I shall expect you to have made a plan. You’ll either try to become ThunderClan cats, leave and join another Clan if one will accept you, or leave Clan territory entirely. But if you do decide to join ThunderClan, you must learn the warrior code and live by it.”

Nightheart realized that he had grown fond of Wasp and Waffle; he hoped they would become ThunderClan cats. “ThunderClan’s first leader was a great cat, too,” he meowed, a bit nervous about speaking from the Clan leader’s place on the Highledge. “The park cats have only heard about Riverstar. Maybe if they learn more about ThunderClan’s history, they’ll realize this is the Clan they want to join.”

“That’s a good point.” Brambleclaw gave Nightheart an approving nod as he rose from where he was sitting with the other elders. “I’ve heard that Thunderstar, who founded ThunderClan, was a noble cat

who always fought for what was right. They say he was one of the biggest, most powerful cats of his time."

"There was a great battle in the forest." Jayfeather took up the story, turning his blind blue gaze on the two park cats. "Afterward, StarClan told the first leaders to divide into Clans and lead their followers so that they would never turn on each other again."

"See how *that* turned out." Thornclaw's mutter only just reached Nightheart's ears.

Cloudtail batted Thornclaw over the ear, his claws sheathed, while Jayfeather continued.

"As time went on, each cat went to the Clan that suited them: cunning ShadowClan, swimming RiverClan, fast-running WindClan, powerfully leaping SkyClan, and courageous, loyal ThunderClan."

"Yeah, ThunderClan is the best!" Mousewhisker exclaimed. "After all, we had the greatest leader in the forest: Firestar."

"Brambleclaw was a great leader too, when he was Bramblestar," Squirrelstar declared, with an affectionate glance at her mate. "He survived the time when he was trapped in the Dark Forest and helped to rid the Clans of Ashfur—a wicked cat who tried to destroy us all."

Wasp looked at Waffle. "I didn't understand a word of that," he grumbled.

Waffle's eyes were bright with interest. "It sounds like a great story," he meowed. "I'd like to hear all of it."

"We'll tell you everything," Sparkpelt promised, dipping her head toward the park cats. "And all about Firestar, too. He once led the Clans in a great battle against the cats of the Dark Forest."

"Yes, if it weren't for Firestar, the Dark Forest cats would have won," Lionblaze added.

"Don't forget the Great Journey," Birchfall put in. "Twolegs destroyed the old forest where we used to live, and Firestar led all four Clans to find this place by the lake."

Waffle blinked, glancing briefly at Nightheart. "*Four* Clans," he murmured. "Aren't there five Clans?"

"There was a time when SkyClan was lost," Brackenfur purred, "until Firestar went on a quest to find them. That's another great

story. You park cats should come and sit with us elders, and we'll tell you *all* the stories."

Nightheart could see that Wasp was looking a bit uncertain, his whiskers quivering uneasily. "Being a Clan cat sounds sort of . . . eventful," he commented.

Waffle was working his claws in the ground. "It sounds exciting! I'm really looking forward to hearing more about ThunderClan," he added to Squirrelstar.

Wasp, clearly struggling to banish his nervousness, dipped his head politely to the Clan leader. "Thank you for allowing us to stay for now," he mewed.

"Then that's settled," Squirrelstar responded. "Nightheart, you brought our guests to ThunderClan, so they will be your responsibility while they're here. And you will have to do some extra hunting for them."

"That's fine by me," Nightheart declared, pleased that his friends had been allowed to stay in his Clan. "I promise I'll take good care of them."

Chapter 3

Crouching low among the debris of the forest floor, Sunbeam fixed her eyes on a squirrel that was scuffling around at the foot of a beech tree near the WindClan border stream. Water flooded her jaws as the breeze brought the animal's scent toward her. She gathered herself; she knew that if she miscalculated her leap, her prey would disappear up the tree in the time it would take her to blink.

Now!

Thrusting off with her powerful hind legs, Sunbeam launched herself at the squirrel. At the last moment it became aware of her and scrambled for the tree, but Sunbeam landed beside it and sank her claws into its neck. Its shriek was cut off as she bit down.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," Sunbeam mewed.

"Hey, that was a brilliant catch." Nightheart padded up to her and gave her ear a lick.

"Thanks, Nightheart." Sunbeam let out a long purr. "I'm so happy you're back," she continued. "And that we hunt so well together."

"We do," Nightheart agreed. "And I'm happy to *be* back—with my Clan and with you. I missed you so much."

Sunbeam touched her nose to his, then gave her pelt a shake. "Come on, I'd better bury this squirrel with the rest of our prey. We need plenty now that we have two visitors to feed."

She carried her prey to the hole they had dug out to store their catch until they were ready to carry it back to camp. As she scraped away the soil to make room for the squirrel, she felt a deep satisfaction. She and Nightheart had caught so much!

Our Clan will eat well tonight.

Then Sunbeam noticed that there was a starling among the heap of prey, and her satisfaction gave way to a tiny pang of anxiety. Starling was her mother's favorite fresh-kill, and Sunbeam had scarcely ever had any; it wasn't the easiest bird to catch, and it was more common here in ThunderClan's forest than on ShadowClan territory.

Sunbeam still found it hard to believe that at the Gathering a quarter moon ago, Berryheart had tried to depose Tigerstar. It was

harder still to accept that her mother had left ShadowClan, along with Sunbeam's father, Sparrowtail, and her brother Hollowspring. She let out a sigh, wondering whether she would ever see them again.

"Are you okay?" Nightheart asked, touching his tail to her shoulder. "You look worried."

"I *am* worried," Sunbeam confessed. "About Berryheart and the rest of my kin. They've left Clan territory, and I'm afraid of what might happen to them."

"Berryheart left?" Nightheart's eyes stretched wide with surprise. "But she loved ShadowClan so much! She didn't even want to let outsiders into the Clan," he added ruefully.

Sunbeam nodded, remembering the tough tasks her mother had given Nightheart when he was trying to join her Clan. "I think it's *because* she loved ShadowClan so much," she told Nightheart. "She didn't approve of how Tigerstar was leading the Clan, and so she tried to depose him."

Nightheart gaped as if he could hardly believe Sunbeam's story. "Depose Tigerstar? How did she think she would get away with that?"

"You know Berryheart," Sunbeam replied, letting her tail droop with sadness. "If she believes she's right, she won't let anything stop her."

Nightheart rubbed his cheek comfortingly against hers. "Berryheart made a terrible mistake," he meowed. "But I'm sure your kin are strong enough to survive wherever they happen to be. And I like to think that I'm your family now. Even in ThunderClan, you're not alone."

"I know." Sunbeam felt the cloud of her anxiety lift a little. "I'm really happy to be a ThunderClan cat."

Nightheart brushed his tail along Sunbeam's flank. "I suppose we should think about what we want for our future. How do you feel about kits?"

Sunbeam felt warmth spread all over her body, as if she had stepped into a patch of sunlight. "Oh, I want them!" she exclaimed. "I know my mother can be difficult, but I was happy when I was a kit. And I want to raise kits with you, Nightheart."

“You will have the most beautiful kits,” Nightheart purred.

“Our litter would have the best of both of us,” Sunbeam responded. “Stealthy little ShadowClan furballs with the courage of ThunderClan! But . . . not quite yet?”

She was pleased when Nightheart nodded in agreement. “It would be nice to wait a few seasons and enjoy spending time together,” he meowed. “Without anything to distract us. We’ve never been able to just . . . *be* together without some threat or problem.”

“Or without one of us trying to prove themselves to the other’s Clan,” Sunbeam added.

A deep purr rose from the depths of Nightheart’s chest, and he twined his tail affectionately with Sunbeam’s. “That sounds perfect to me. As long as we raise kits together eventually.”

Watching Nightheart gaze into her eyes, Sunbeam felt that she could stand like this forever, bathing in the love she felt for him, and his love for her.

“Yuck!” In the next heartbeat a loud voice interrupted her reverie. “Why can’t you discuss all this mushy stuff in private? Somewhere we don’t have to listen to you.”

Sunbeam sprang away from Nightheart and whirled to face the border stream. Breezepelt, his tail curled up in amusement, stood on the opposite bank, along with Woodsong and Crouchfoot, who had their heads together, snickering. Sunbeam’s fur felt hot with embarrassment that the WindClan border patrol had overheard what she and Nightheart were saying to each other.

“Nice to see you, too, Breezepelt,” Nightheart mewed calmly.

Breezepelt dipped his head. “It’s good to have you home again, Nightheart,” he continued, a friendly tone replacing his mockery. “I was hoping to meet some cat I could talk to about the last Gathering. That was pretty shocking, what Frostpaw said. Do you believe her?”

“I do,” Nightheart replied. “I’m absolutely sure that Frostpaw is telling the truth. And I’m worried about what Splashtail is going to do now.”

“What do Harestar and the rest of your Clanmates think?” Sunbeam asked, recovering from her shock at the interruption. “Does it make a difference that Whistlepaw is on Frostpaw’s side?”

Breezepelt and the rest of his patrol exchanged dubious glances.

“Harestar and Kestrelflight are pretty angry with Whistlepaw,” Breezepelt admitted, “because she didn’t tell them that she knew Frostpaw was alive.”

“A medicine cat is supposed to be loyal to their Clan,” Crouchfoot added, “not keep secrets from their leader. And apprentices shouldn’t keep secrets from their mentors.”

“I think Harestar at least has his doubts about Splashtail,” Breezepelt went on. “He believes Frostpaw might be telling the truth, but he doesn’t want to get WindClan caught up in RiverClan’s business. He’s waiting to see whether StarClan will grant Splashtail nine lives.” He paused, his whiskers twitching anxiously, and then added, “If the last few moons and the trouble with ShadowClan have taught us anything, it’s that Clans have to choose their own leaders.”

Nightheart nodded. “That’s true. Squirrelstar seems to feel the same way.”

Breezepelt flicked his tail to gather his patrol, then appeared to change his mind, turning toward Sunbeam. “I couldn’t believe it when Berryheart tried to depose Tigerstar,” he meowed. “Did she really think she could pull that off?”

Sunbeam suppressed a pang of guilt at her disloyalty, because she agreed with the WindClan warrior. “Berryheart is very . . . determined,” she muttered.

“Even so,” Woodsong mewed sympathetically, “it’s a shame to see what’s happening to her.”

A chill of apprehension crept through Sunbeam from ears to tail-tip. “What do you mean?” she asked the brown she-cat.

The three WindClan cats glanced at one another, guilt in their eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Woodsong responded. “I thought you had already heard.”

“Heard what?” Nightheart asked, taking a pace that brought him close to Sunbeam’s side.

For a moment Woodsong hesitated, and it was Breezepelt who replied. “Sparrowtail, Hollowspring, and Berryheart have been spotted on land just beyond our border.” He gestured with his tail across the swell of moorland.

“Why shouldn’t Sunbeam’s kin be there?” Nightheart asked. Sunbeam felt a little better to hear his sharp tone, defending her. “It isn’t any Clan’s territory.”

“That’s true.” Breezepelt shrugged. “But . . . well, we’ve heard that they don’t look great, and Berryheart seems to have been injured.”

Sunbeam felt as sick as if she had swallowed crow-food and the lump was stuck somewhere in her chest. Until now she had at least thought her parents and her brother would be okay as long as they stayed together. “My mother is hurt?” she echoed.

Breezepelt gave her a close, narrow-eyed look. “Are you planning to check on them?” he asked. “Or is looking after kin outside the Clan against ThunderClan’s rules?”

Sunbeam was aware of Nightheart close to her, bristling with anger, but she thought there might be another meaning to the WindClan tom’s words. She saw a strange glint in his eyes and remembered hearing that when Breezepelt’s mother, Nightcloud, disappeared and every cat believed she was dead, he had searched and searched until he found her.

Is he telling me this so that I can find my kin if I want to?

“Berryheart and my father and brother made their choice,” she responded quietly, giving nothing away. “And they are quite capable of taking care of themselves. If they’re having any trouble out there, they could always come back, but knowing my mother, they won’t.”

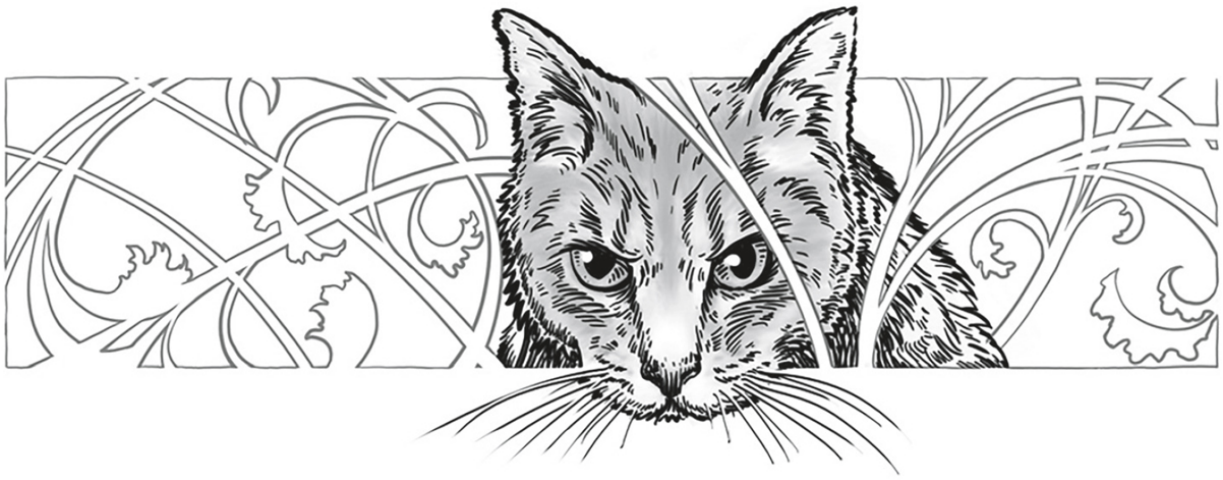
“Yeah.” Breezepelt let out a snort, half annoyed, half amused. “Parents are the worst, right?”

Sunbeam reflected that since Breezepelt’s father was Crowfeather, the prickly WindClan deputy, the black tom knew a thing or two about difficult parents. She didn’t reply, only saying goodbye to the WindClan cats. Breezepelt gave a polite nod and led his patrol away along the stream.

Nightheart turned to head toward the place where they had buried their prey, then glanced back at Sunbeam. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“I guess so,” Sunbeam sighed. “I didn’t want Breezepelt and the others to see how upset I am. But I’m worried, and I don’t know what I should do. Berryheart made my life really difficult in the last few

seasons, but she's still my mother, and it sounds as if she's been hurt." She drew in a long breath. "Oh, Nightheart!" she cried. "How can I know my parents are suffering and not do whatever I can to help them?"



Chapter 4

Frostpaw struggled awake, a confusing dream still clinging around her. She opened her eyes, brushed aside a stem of bracken, and stared up at the roof of a den that seemed completely unfamiliar.

Where am I?

Then, as Frostpaw shook off the last wisps of sleep, she remembered that this was the medicine cats' den in the ShadowClan camp. A quarter moon had passed since Puddleshine and Shadowsight had welcomed her there, but it still felt strange to be in a camp that wasn't her beloved RiverClan.

Frostpaw missed the gentle gurgling of the streams that surrounded RiverClan's camp and the scent of the water plants that grew along their banks. She was homesick for all of RiverClan, for her den and the familiar territory, and especially for the cats she had known ever since her eyes had opened for the first time. She was grateful to Tigerstar for taking her in, and both ShadowClan medicine cats had been friendly, but the warriors gave her wary glances and kept their distance from her.

Sitting up, Frostpaw couldn't see Puddleshine, but Shadowsight was at the other side of the den with a heap of herbs in front of him.

"Tansy, chervil, marigold . . . ," he murmured, sorting the stems into separate piles. When Frostpaw raised one paw to scratch her ear, he turned toward her. "Hi," he mewed. Giving her a closer look, he added, "Are you okay?"

Frostpaw realized that she must look unhappy, or perhaps Shadowsight was sensitive enough to understand what she was feeling. "I'm fine," she responded. "Just . . . just a bit homesick. I know what ShadowClan has done for me," she added hastily, "but I miss RiverClan so much."

"I understand." Shadowsight padded over to her and touched her ear with his nose. "Let's hope it won't be long before you can go home."

Frostpaw let out a long sigh. "I don't see how I can. Splashtail wants me dead, and none of my Clanmates believe me when I warn them about him."

“I know how you feel,” Shadowsight murmured gently. “There was a time when my Clanmates didn’t believe me. But I got through it, and you will, too.”

Frostpaw remembered the story of how Shadowsight had been deceived by the usurper Ashfur, and how, though he was still a medicine cat, he no longer received visions from StarClan. *He had it much harder than me.*

“Thank you,” she breathed out.

“Anyway, now that you’re awake,” Shadowsight continued more briskly, “do you want to come and share some prey with me?”

“But you’re busy,” Frostpaw protested.

“The herbs won’t run away,” Shadowsight responded. “And I’m starving. Come on.”

Frostpaw followed him out of the den and over to the fresh-kill pile, where Shadowsight picked out a plump frog. Frostpaw felt her jaws start to water; she’d been surprised by how much she liked this ShadowClan prey. Frogs weren’t very popular in RiverClan.

But as soon as she and Shadowsight settled down to eat, side by side, Tigerstar emerged from his den and leaped up onto the Pinebranch.

“Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Pinebranch for a Clan meeting!” he yowled.

He waited, his claws working with impatience, while the ShadowClan cats gathered and settled down underneath the branch.

“Since the Gathering, I’ve been thinking,” Tigerstar began. “If Berryheart tried to depose me, she must have believed she had enough support to make it happen. I’m not going to ask for an oath of loyalty from any cat, but I want all my warriors to feel that they can discuss their grievances with me. Any cat who has a complaint can voice it now.”

The ShadowClan cats glanced at one another, shifting on their paws. Frostpaw could understand why they were reluctant to speak up; Tigerstar wasn’t the most approachable cat, even though he was inviting comments now.

Her pads prickled with irritation. She was grateful to Tigerstar for taking her in, but surely he must realize how much trouble he’d

started in both RiverClan and ShadowClan. She wondered why no cat wanted to mention that.

Well, I don't have a lot to lose.

"Tigerstar, maybe some cats had a problem with you deciding that your Clan needed to take over RiverClan," she meowed, raising her head to meet the ShadowClan leader's amber gaze. "It wasn't great for either Clan."

Tigerstar's eyes narrowed and his tail began to twitch, but before he could speak, some of the ShadowClan warriors broke in.

"She's right about that!" Grassheart grumbled.

"We were stuck guarding RiverClan, and it was horrible!" Gullswoop agreed, her whiskers bristling resentfully.

Tigerstar raised his tail for silence, letting out a long sigh. "The strong line I took with RiverClan was maybe a mistake," he admitted. "But my intentions were good. I wasn't trying to conquer RiverClan, and I don't think any of you believe I was. I just desperately wanted to keep them from falling apart. If we learned anything from the Ashfur disaster, it's that when one Clan suffers, eventually we all suffer."

Most of the ShadowClan warriors still looked doubtful, though instead of protesting aloud, they began muttering among themselves. Others, Frostpaw could see, were nodding in agreement with their leader.

Tigerstar waited for a moment and then continued. "I don't want to be surprised again by ShadowClan cats trying to depose me," he meowed firmly. "If any cat has a problem with me, they need to discuss it in camp. ShadowClan can't look weak and divided in front of the other Clans. If things get to the point where my Clanmates truly don't want me as leader anymore, I will step down rather than tear apart the Clan we love."

At these words, Tigerstar's daughter, Lightleap, let out an indignant yowl. Frostpaw was surprised at the leader's declaration. She couldn't imagine Tigerstar ever voluntarily giving up power, and she admitted to herself that it wouldn't be good for his Clan if he did.

Cloverfoot, the ShadowClan deputy, rose to her paws and gave Tigerstar a respectful nod. "I think I can say that we all agree," she

declared. “I still want you to stay as leader, but I appreciate that you will listen to your Clanmates more.”

The ShadowClan warriors murmured approval, beginning to look happier.

“Thank you, Cloverfoot,” Tigerstar responded. “Now we can work together to make ShadowClan as strong as it can be.” He swept his gaze across the assembled cats, then added, “This meeting is at an end.”

Tigerstar jumped down from the branch and beckoned Frostpaw with his tail. “Frostpaw, a word,” he mewed.

What now? Frostpaw gulped nervously as she padded up to the Clan leader.

“You’re not a member of ShadowClan,” Tigerstar began, stooping over her with a stern look, “but I was kind enough to give you a place here when your own Clan forced you out. And now you repay me by questioning my decisions in front of my own warriors?”

Frostpaw felt her shoulder fur begin to bristle. “That decision affected my Clan even more than it did yours,” she retorted. “And I do agree that it was kind of you to take me in, but that won’t make me hold my tongue when I have something to say. I believe that only honesty can save RiverClan now.”

Tigerstar let out a little *mrrow* of laughter. “You’re not the timid apprentice you were a few moons ago,” he commented.

“A lot has happened since then,” Frostpaw responded. “And speaking of that, I would like to go see what’s happening in RiverClan’s camp. I’m worried about what Splashtail might be doing, and whether my Clanmates are safe now that the truth is out.”

Tigerstar blinked in surprise, then paused for a moment to think. Frostpaw flexed her claws impatiently as she waited for his decision.

“We still don’t know whether Splashtail has gone to the Moonpool to receive his nine lives,” she added, hoping that Tigerstar wanted to know that as much as she did herself. “I might be able to find out. And if he hasn’t, we need to know why not.”

“Good point,” Tigerstar grunted. “And if he has gone, did StarClan reject him? I’m not going to try to stop you,” he declared at last. “But if you’re going to cross borders and trespass on territory you’ve been banned from, I’m not going to protect you, either. And you can’t take

any ShadowClan cat with you. If you get caught by RiverClan, you will be on your own."

"Thank you," Frostpaw responded. "I promise I won't involve ShadowClan in any trouble."

With a polite nod to the Clan leader, she turned and headed out of the camp.

I'm not going to get caught, she told herself. *I know RiverClan's territory as well as any cat.*

On the edge of the stretch of Thunderpath stuff that marked the border between the two territories, Frostpaw rolled herself in a clump of chervil to disguise her scent, then cautiously ventured into RiverClan territory, keeping a wary eye out for her Clanmates. Even though she was in danger, it felt good to be in familiar surroundings. To be going home.

Frostpaw grew even more cautious as she approached the RiverClan camp, pausing every few paw steps to taste the air and check that she was downwind. As she drew closer, her fur bushed out in alarm at the sound of yowls and screeches coming from the direction of the camp.

Is some cat attacking my Clan?

Her breath coming short, Frostpaw waded through the stream and huddled in the bushes at the edge of the clearing. From a gap between two fronds of fern, she could see that the stretch of open ground was filled with warriors training for battle. Cats were attacking one another in groups of three or four, while Splashtail stalked among them.

"Pick up the pace!" he yowled. "Lizardtail, are you a kit? Get some force behind those blows! Shimmerpelt, I'd have slashed open your throat by now—and you'd deserve it." He swiped Mallownose across his ear. "Move!" he growled. "Get those claws out! You're not play fighting anymore!"

Sneezecloud stumbled back from the skirmish, his chest heaving. "What's all this training for, Splashtail?" he gasped. "No Clan is threatening us."

Splashtail whirled to face him, his lips drawn back threateningly. "Do you want ShadowClan to come back?" he demanded. "Do you

want us to be invaded and humiliated again? Remember, you'll have new kits to protect soon."

Sneezecloud took a step back, clearly surprised to be challenged so strongly by his own son. "No, Splashtail."

"Then get on with it. Am I leading a Clan of mice?" Splashtail raised his voice to be heard across the clearing, and the battling warriors paused to listen. "Tigerstar and ShadowClan invaded us for no reason," Splashtail went on. "But one day, we'll have our revenge!"

A yowl of enthusiasm broke from his warriors. "We'll *shred* them!" Nightsky caterwauled.

"We will." Splashtail gave the dark gray she-cat an approving glance. "RiverClan won't just be *as* great as it was under Mistystar. We'll work together to make it greater still!"

Every hair on Frostpaw's pelt prickled with suspicion. Was Splashtail truly planning to fight ShadowClan? Did he mean to expand RiverClan's territory? He had said nothing specific that would be useful for Tigerstar or the leaders of the other Clans to hear. She would be able to inform them that she was certain of Splashtail's bad intentions, but not when or where he planned to attack.

Duskfur shook off Brackenpelt, who was pinning her down, and rose to her paws. "Once StarClan grants you nine lives, Splashtail," she mewed, "and officially makes you our leader, ShadowClan won't dare invade us again."

There was a tightness in Duskfur's voice that implied annoyance. Frostpaw was relieved to hear that Splashtail hadn't received nine lives yet, but she also wondered why he had put off trying. Surely her Clanmates were eager to put a *star* after his name so they could be a fully functioning Clan again.

Splashtail padded over to confront the brown tabby she-cat; Frostpaw flinched at the murderous look in his eyes.

"Do you really believe that?" he snarled. "Do you think that Tigerstar's invasion was ever about us not having a leader, or anything other than ShadowClan's greed and ambition? Don't be mouse-brained! I'll travel to the Moonpool in my own good time, but for now you must understand that there's only one thing that will stop a strong Clan from invading. That is a stronger Clan to fight them off.

And *that* is why I've chosen to focus on what we can control: our own battle skills. StarClan's opinions aren't important; they'll give me my nine lives when *I'm* good and ready."

Frostpaw's ears flicked up at the RiverClan tom's words. StarClan's *opinions*? She understood why Splashtail might fear going to the Moonpool, risking StarClan's judgment for what he had done to his Clan. From what Riverstar had told her in her dreams, StarClan would never support Splashtail. And Splashtail had to know that once StarClan had rejected him, he would lose the support of most of his warriors.

But what shocked Frostpaw to the depths of her fur was the way that the would-be leader had referred to the granting of nine lives as StarClan's *opinions*. Was he trying to pretend that StarClan had no importance in the life of the Clan? Did he really think he could convince his Clanmates that he was the right leader for them *without* his nine lives?

Then another future opened up to Frostpaw, so horrific that it drove ice through her blood and froze her paws to the ground with fear. What if Splashtail put off going to the Moonpool for so long that his Clan simply accepted him? That would mean that RiverClan would be totally cut off from StarClan, with Podlight unable to contact the spirits of their warrior ancestors, and Splashtail refusing to.

That mustn't happen! Frostpaw resolved. Yet even with new insights tumbling through her mind, there were still questions she could not answer. *What else is Splashtail planning? Why does he want to become Splashstar badly enough to kill for it?*

While she observed her Clan from the shelter of the bushes, thinking about what she had seen, Frostpaw could feel some cat's gaze resting on her. Her muscles tensed and the fur on her shoulders rose in apprehension. Looking around, she spotted Mothwing at the edge of the camp clearing, amber eyes staring straight at her.

She must have caught sight of me through the bushes.

Frostpaw froze, feeling that every cat in the camp must be able to hear the pounding of her heart. She expected Mothwing to yowl out a warning, and for the RiverClan warriors to drag her in front of Splashtail to be punished.

Instead the older medicine cat flicked her tail toward the slope that led down to her den beside the stream. She began to pad in that direction, keeping out of sight of Splashtail and the RiverClan warriors. Frostpaw hurried to follow her, catching up to her on the stretch of pebbles outside the medicine cat's den.

"What are you *thinking*?" Mothwing turned on Frostpaw the instant she leaped down from the bank that overhung the den. "Are you completely mouse-brained, coming to spy on the camp like this? Do you want to get caught?" She flicked her tail again, beckoning Frostpaw farther downstream. "Come on—we can't talk here."

Frostpaw was a little encouraged by the way that Mothwing's scolding seemed to be out of concern for her, not anger that she had disobeyed Splashtail by returning to the camp.

"I know you don't believe me," she mewed, holding her head high. "But Splashtail is a killer and a threat to all of RiverClan."

Mothwing hesitated briefly, trouble in her amber eyes as she flicked a nervous glance over her shoulder, toward the clearing. "I do believe you," she confessed at last, looking back to Frostpaw, "but I need to keep Splashtail happy for now. I'm not leaving RiverClan without a medicine cat. Podlight is a long way from being ready to treat his Clanmates' illnesses and injuries."

"I understand," Frostpaw responded, realizing that she did. She could see how torn her former mentor must be. "But isn't there anything you can do?"

"I've been trying to speak to the others." Mothwing slipped into a hollow underneath the bank of the stream and waited for Frostpaw to follow her. "Just a word here and there," she continued, "to help them see that Splashtail might not be telling the truth. It's very strange, if nothing else, that he seems to be in no hurry to go to the Moonpool." Her mouth twisted wryly. "I know I haven't always been StarClan's biggest supporter, but RiverClan needs a leader who's been approved by StarClan. I think the best I can do right now is to plant that bit of doubt, but so far it's not going very well."

"Isn't there some cat who would believe you?" Frostpaw asked, thinking of all the cats she had trusted before this disaster befell her Clan. "Duskfur, Icewing, even my littermates . . ."

Unhappily, Mothwing shook her head. “Mistpaw and Graypaw certainly weren’t happy to learn the truth about their mother, and I think they may doubt Splashtail’s version of events. Duskfur and Icewing have misgivings about Splashtail, I can tell. But ultimately, every cat is just so relieved that we have a leader again, and one who seems to know what he’s doing. He says he’ll go to the Moonpool when the time is right, and no cat is pushing him.”

Frostpaw’s belly cramped with anxiety at what the medicine cat was telling her. Didn’t Mothwing realize that Splashtail might be trying to delay indefinitely, until RiverClan no longer thought it was necessary?

“Mothwing, you have to *make* him go,” she urged her former mentor. “You’re a medicine cat; he’ll listen to you.”

Mothwing gave a snort. “I’m not sure any cat *makes* Splashtail do anything,” she responded. “And you’re forgetting that I’m a medicine cat who doesn’t speak with StarClan. I’m the last cat who could persuade him that he has to go to the Moonpool.”

“But suppose he never goes?” Frostpaw meowed. “Suppose the Clan accepts that? Then no cat would ever know that StarClan would reject him.”

Mothwing’s eyes widened as if she had never considered that possibility, but after a moment she twitched her whiskers dismissively. “He’ll have to go eventually, and then surely StarClan won’t actually give him nine lives.”

But what if they do? Another horrible prospect opened up in front of Frostpaw. *What if StarClan just wants RiverClan to have a strong leader?*

“Mothwing, you have to try to speak out more against him,” she urged her former mentor. “You’re so respected in the Clan. Don’t you think some of the cats will listen to you?”

“No.” Mothwing shook her head decisively. “If I speak against Splashtail, I’ll be exiled from RiverClan just like you, and I won’t risk that. You’ve just seen how he’s training our Clanmates for battle, and I’m afraid of what comes next. I’ve seen it before, when the first Tigerstar led ShadowClan: The whole forest was caught up in war. And now Podlight barely listens to what I’m trying to teach him. He can’t tell tansy from marigold—and what’s more, he doesn’t seem to

care. I’m not going to leave my Clanmates to die from battle wounds when a competent medicine cat could save them.”

Frostpaw shivered at the images Mothwing called up. “I hope it won’t come to that,” she mewed, knowing how feeble she sounded.

Mothwing’s tail drooped. “I’m not sure what will happen to RiverClan,” she sighed, “but I’m afraid it will end in blood.”

Chapter 5

A warm breeze was rustling the branches of the Ancient Oak. Nightheart stood at its foot with Sunbeam and Finchlight by his side, while above their heads the two park cats perched on a branch. Every cat's eyes were bright, their ears pricked and their jaws parted to pick up the faintest trace of prey.

"This is one of the most important things about hunting," Nightheart meowed, looking up at the two visitors. "Pinpoint your prey. It's no good just stomping through the forest and hoping that prey will conveniently leap into your jaws. You need to know exactly what you're aiming for before you start stalking."

Since the arrival of the park cats, Nightheart had worked hard to obey Squirrelstar's orders that he be the one who kept the newcomers fed. Besides that, he was doing his best to show Wasp and Waffle what Clan life was like. So far, both Wasp and Waffle seemed to be enjoying what he had to teach them.

"I think I can smell squirrel!" Waffle exclaimed.

"And I can see it." Wasp pointed with his tail at a small gray creature making its way down the trunk of a tree a few fox-lengths closer to the lake.

"Please, Nightheart, can I try to catch it?" Waffle begged, flexing his claws in excitement. "I've watched you enough times—I think I know what to do."

"Maybe another day," Nightheart told him. He wasn't refusing because he thought the park cats couldn't do it. He had already taught them some things, in the park and on the journey home. But he hadn't forgotten that visitors were forbidden from hunting on Clan territory. Besides, his belly was telling him that he needed fresh-kill *now*, and he guessed that Sunbeam and Finchlight felt the same. They would all eat more quickly if one of the experienced warriors hunted.

"Just keep watching and learning," he advised Waffle. "You're doing very well, but you still need time to absorb what I'm teaching you."

“Okay, show us what to do,” Waffle mewed eagerly. He was obviously disappointed not to catch something himself but was trying hard to hide it.

“Are we going for that squirrel?” Sunbeam asked, her whiskers quivering with impatience. “It won’t sit around forever.”

The squirrel had moved away from the foot of the tree and was nibbling at something it had found in the undergrowth, its tail curled over its back.

Nightheart nodded. With a wave of his tail, he told Finchlight and Sunbeam to creep around in a wide curve on either side of the squirrel, ready to trap it if it fled in their direction. Sunbeam, her belly flat to the ground, positioned herself so that she could catch it if it tried to escape up the tree.

Tasting the air, Nightheart realized this was going to be tricky. The breeze was blowing toward the squirrel, and if he wasn’t very careful, it would sense him.

He crept forward stealthily, but almost at once the squirrel sat erect, alarm showing in its pricked ears and quivering tail. It turned to flee for its tree, only to let out a shriek of terror as Sunbeam leaped toward it with a growl. The squirrel veered away, almost collided with Finchlight, then turned and flung itself forward into Nightheart’s paws as he raced up to grip it by the neck before giving it a quick, merciful killing bite.

Carrying the limp body, he paced back toward the Ancient Oak, where Wasp and Waffle were looking on admiringly.

“That was so fast!” Wasp exclaimed.

“Yes, and great teamwork,” Waffle added.

As Sunbeam and Finchlight padded up, Nightheart dropped the squirrel at the foot of the tree. “Thank you, StarClan, for this prey,” he mewed.

“Why do Clan cats say that when they catch something?” Wasp asked.

“If StarClan didn’t bless us with prey, the Clan cats would starve,” Nightheart explained. “Every Clan cat expresses gratitude to StarClan.”

Waffle’s eyes lit up. “RiverClan too?”

“Yes, RiverClan follows the custom too,” Nightheart assured him. “It’s part of the warrior code.”

The park tom was looking thoughtful. “Hunting must be different in RiverClan, though. They catch their prey from under the water, right? What’s that like—is it gross? Or tasty?”

“I can’t really answer that,” Nightheart replied. “I haven’t had all that much experience eating fish and frogs. Though I did once catch a lot of frogs—it’s a long story.”

“Frogs?” Waffle looked like was trying to imagine how frogs would taste, and passed his tongue over his jaws as if he didn’t much like the idea.

“This squirrel is going to be so tasty!” Nightheart tried to sound enthusiastic, to distract Waffle from all this talk of frogs.

“If we ever get to eat it,” Finchlight muttered. “Can’t we eat first and talk afterward?”

“I heard that Clan cats have to take all their prey back to camp and feed the Clan first,” Wasp meowed. “Are we allowed to keep the squirrel for ourselves?”

“Yes, it’s okay,” Sunbeam replied, while Nightheart gave Wasp a nod of approval for his concern about the rule. “This is a special session to teach you about how the Clans hunt, and we got permission to eat what we caught. We can enjoy the squirrel.”

“It’s a good plump one, too,” Nightheart added. “And just wait until you get a taste of rabbit! You won’t believe how delicious that is!”

When the five cats had shared their prey, they headed back to the ThunderClan camp. Wasp and Waffle brought up the rear, chatting together about how much they had enjoyed learning the hunting techniques. Nightheart was pleased to hear that, until Waffle started to talk again about how different hunting must be in RiverClan.

“Do you think if they take fish from the lake, it carries the taste of the rocks that are in the water?” he asked. “I can’t even imagine what that would be like!”

Concern clawed at Nightheart’s belly as he led the way through the thorn tunnel back into the camp. He had hoped that talking about tasty squirrels and rabbits would get them excited about

ThunderClan, or at least help them see that they could make other choices than RiverClan, if the worst happened and the Clan wasn't the same under Splashtail's so-called leadership.

Nightheart was worried about how disappointed the park cats would be if they never got to see the Clan they had heard about ever since they were kits. If Splashtail established himself, RiverClan might never again be a welcoming Clan. He hated to think that the long journey the two park cats had made with him and Frostpaw would seem wasted, needless.

I'd miss them if they decided to leave, he reflected. *I just need to get them excited about being in ThunderClan . . . and I know just who can make that happen.*

"Follow me," he meowed to the park cats.

"I'll see you later." Sunbeam gave him a nod as she headed toward the warriors' den. "I need to get some thorns out of my nest."

"I'll help you," Finchlight mewed.

Nightheart watched the two she-cats disappear into their den, then led the way across the camp and peered through the outer branches of the hazel bush that sheltered the elders. Cloudtail and Brightheart were curled up together, drowsily sharing tongues, while Thornclaw was giving himself a good scratch behind one ear. Brackenfur and Brambleclaw were crouched with their paws tucked under themselves, sharing a vole.

"Can we please come in?" Nightheart asked. "Wasp and Waffle would like to hear some of your stories."

"Of course, you're welcome," Brackenfur responded, gulping down the last mouthful of vole and swiping one paw over his whiskers. "We hoped you would come. We can tell you anything you want to know about ThunderClan."

Nightheart slid through the hazel branches, closely followed by the park cats, and found a place to sit near the entrance. When Brightheart beckoned to them, Wasp and Waffle ventured a little farther in and sat close together, gazing expectantly at the elders.

"When we first arrived," Waffle began hesitantly, "some of the cats were talking about the Dark Forest. It doesn't sound like a very nice place. Is it near here? Do cats ever go there?"

Cloudtail let out a rumble in his throat. “No, it is *not* a nice place. And cats don’t go there. Not unless they’ve done something *evil*.”

Brightheart batted him over the ear with her tail. “Mouse-brained furball! What sort of an explanation is that?” Turning to the park cats, she continued, “You know about StarClan, right? The spirits of our warrior ancestors? You know that when we die, we go to join them in their hunting grounds?”

Wasp nodded. “Frostpaw told us that.”

“Well,” Brightheart continued, “when a cat has been really evil—not just making a mistake, or maybe breaking the warrior code, but deliberately choosing to set their paws on the path of wickedness—they go to the Dark Forest when they die.”

Waffle shivered. “What is it like?”

“Brambleclaw is the cat you ought to ask,” Thornclaw replied. “He’s been there recently.”

“Not because he’s evil,” Brightheart added hastily, as the two park cats gave Brambleclaw a startled glance. “He was forced into the Dark Forest by the spirit of a cat who *was* truly evil. And it was quite harrowing, really. Brambleclaw, are you comfortable talking about it?”

Brambleclaw looked thoughtful. “I’m happy to hear these cats’ questions. Just bear with me, young ones; there are some bits I’d rather not remember.”

Wasp nodded respectfully. “If it’s really that terrible, can I ask how you got out?”

Brambleclaw shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about that,” he meowed. “They call it the Place of No Stars. That should be enough for any cat.”

There was a moment’s silence as the elders dipped their heads in respect for Brambleclaw and the ordeal he had endured. Nightheart felt a twinge of disappointment. He understood the former leader’s reluctance to relive it, but he would have loved to hear from his own mouth the story of how he had been driven out of his body and trapped in the Dark Forest by the evil impostor Ashfur.

“Well, we can tell you about those mange-ridden Dark Forest cats and the Great Battle that the living cats fought against them,” Brackenfur declared. “It was terrifying. I wouldn’t want to go through that again!”

Brightheart blinked sadly. “So many cats died,” she mewed. “And Firestar gave up his last life.”

“What happened?” Wasp asked.

“Tigerstar gathered all the Dark Forest cats together, and he started training living cats, in their dreams, to fight against the Clans. He—”

“Tigerstar?” Wasp exclaimed. “The leader of ShadowClan?”

“I thought he was a decent cat,” Waffle added.

“No, this was a different Tigerstar,” Bramblestar explained. “He was leader of ShadowClan back in the old forest . . . he was my father, and the Tigerstar you met at the Gathering is his kin too, but we both put his legacy behind us long ago.”

Cloudtail flicked his ear, adding, “This Tigerstar is a pain in the tail, but he would never do anything really vile.”

“So what happened?” Waffle repeated eagerly.

“The first Tigerstar hated the living Clans, and so he led the Dark Forest cats in a great battle against us all,” Brackenfur meowed. “He hoped the Clan cats he had trained would join him, but when they realized what he meant to do, most turned on him and fought on our side.”

“I was one of them,” Thornclaw admitted, a look of shame in his eyes. “We all believed that we were being trained to fight so that we could be better warriors for our Clans. I can’t believe that I was so stupid! But I never raised a paw against a living cat.”

Brightheart reached out and touched Thornclaw’s shoulder with her tail. “We know,” she mewed reassuringly. “That’s all been forgiven and forgotten.”

“But we shouldn’t forget Ivypool,” Brackenfur put in. “You’ve met Ivypool, our deputy, right?” he asked the park cats, who nodded. “She was amazing! She went into the Dark Forest night after night, in dreams, to spy on Tigerstar and his cats. I shudder to think what they would have done to her if they’d caught her.”

“She is one brave warrior,” Cloudtail agreed.

Nightheart realized he should have been watching the park cats for their reactions to these stories of ThunderClan’s triumphs. But he was so enthralled himself to hear about things that had happened

long before he was born that he had to admit he wasn't paying attention to their visitors.

"You mentioned the old forest," Waffle meowed. "That isn't another place like the Dark Forest, is it?"

"No," Brightheart replied. "The old forest is where we used to live, before the Twolegs ruined it. They wanted to build Thunderpaths and Twoleg dens, and there was no place left for cats."

Wasp and Waffle exchanged a glance. Their expressions were a mix of shock and outrage. "Just like how our park was once destroyed," Waffle murmured.

Wasp nodded thoughtfully, then turned back to the elders. "But how did you know to come here?" he asked.

"Oh, that's one of the best stories of all!" Brackenfur purred, his eyes lighting up. "But Brambleclaw should be the one to tell it. He was there. Come on, Brambleclaw," he added. "You haven't told a story yet."

Brambleclaw gave an embarrassed shrug. "It wasn't only me," he protested. "There were six of us."

"Tell us, please!" Waffle begged.

Brambleclaw sighed. "Okay . . . StarClan sent a dream," he continued, "to me and to three other cats, one from each of the other Clans: my sister, Tawnypelt, from ShadowClan; Crowfeather from WindClan, though he was only Crowpaw then; and Feathertail from RiverClan."

Nightheart wasn't entirely pleased to notice that the park cats brightened at the mention of a RiverClan cat, though they said nothing.

"The dream warned me that trouble was coming to the forest," Brambleclaw continued, "and that I should meet with the three other cats and listen to what midnight told us. Of course, none of us understood what that meant, until I had another dream. I was drowning in a huge mass of salty water, and the sun was drowning in it too."

The park cats, and Nightheart too, let out gasps of amazement.

"Well, to cut a long story short," Brambleclaw went on, "we discovered that the sun-drown-place was real, and we had to go there. Stormfur of RiverClan came with his sister, Feathertail, and

Squirrelstar—who was still Squirrelpaw then—came with me. When we reached the sun-drown-place, we also found a badger named Midnight."

Waffle's eyes stretched wide with amazement. "A badger! What did you do?"

"We listened to her, just like StarClan told us," Brambleclaw replied. "Midnight was no ordinary badger. She told us that our territories would be taken over by Twolegs, and that all the Clans would have to leave and find a new home. And that's how we came to make the Great Journey that brought us to the lake."

"That's a great story," Waffle meowed. "And I'm sure there's a lot more you haven't told us."

Brambleclaw's eyes glinted with amusement. "I can give you all the details when you have a spare moon or so."

"But wait." Wasp had been staring thoughtfully at the roof of the den. "You talked about four Clans. What about SkyClan? Didn't they go with you?"

"No, because SkyClan wasn't with us then," Brackenfur responded. "And that's another great story, about Firestar, who was ThunderClan leader before Brambleclaw."

"And one of the greatest leaders the forest has ever known," Brightheart put in. "Brambleclaw, you ought to tell that one, too."

"Okay," Brambleclaw agreed, seeming much more willing to talk about Firestar's achievements than his own. "This was back in the old forest. SkyClan used to live there, many seasons ago, but they were forced from their territory when Twolegs destroyed it to build their dens. They traveled a long way and settled in a gorge, but rats attacked them and killed many of them, and at last the whole Clan dwindled away."

"But SkyClan is here now," Wasp pointed out.

"Yes, but again that's all due to Firestar," Brambleclaw responded proudly. Nightheart saw a light of love and respect kindle in the tabby tom's eyes as he named the former leader. His instinctive deference made him seem younger; for a moment Nightheart thought he could glimpse the cat who had been a strong warrior and then a formidable leader of his Clan, a cat he hadn't really known. "There's never been another cat like Firestar in the forest," Brambleclaw continued. "He

went on a quest to find the lost Clan. It all started when he had a dream—"

"Oh, there you are, Nightheart." Ivypool's voice interrupted the former leader. "If you're not busy, I'd like you to join a hunting patrol."

"No, I'm not busy," Nightheart admitted reluctantly. He would have liked to stay and hear the story, which he had only ever heard snatches. When he had been a kit, and then an apprentice, he hadn't wanted to hear anything about the cat his whole Clan expected him to live up to. But now that he had achievements of his own, and a place in his Clan, he felt proud to be kin to the great Firestar. "I'm coming, Ivypool."

"Don't worry, youngster," Brackenfur called after him as he left the elders' den. "We'll tell you all about it another time."

Twilight was creeping over the camp by the time Nightheart returned from his patrol and headed for his nest in the warriors' den. Sunbeam joined him a few heartbeats later, flopping down in the moss and bracken beside him and resting her nose on her paws.

"Wasp and Waffle really liked hearing the elders' stories," Nightheart told her. "You know, they could be such good Clanmates, but they're so restless and curious. . . . They want to see RiverClan so badly, I'm worried that they might never fit in with ThunderClan."

Sunbeam didn't respond; a moment later she gave her whiskers a twitch and turned to look up at him. "Sorry, Nightheart," she mewed. "I wasn't really listening. What did you say?"

Nightheart shook his head, hating to see the distress in the brown-and-white she-cat's beautiful eyes. "I can tell something is wrong," he told her gently. "Are you still worried about what Breezepelt told us?"

Sunbeam shrugged, turning her gaze away, then let out a sigh from the depths of her chest. "I *am* troubled," she confessed. "I've been thinking that I should go and check on Berryheart and the rest of my kin in exile, but I'm afraid that if I do that, I'll upset Squirrelstar. Do you think I should just sneak off and find them, and not tell our leader?"

Nightheart drew his tail down Sunbeam's spine. "No, I think that would be a bad idea," he declared. "Whatever you do, you have to

be honest with Squirrelstar. You've only just joined ThunderClan—you can't give her any reason to question your loyalty to your new Clan, or your respect for your new leader."

Sunbeam hesitated for a heartbeat, then slowly nodded. "That makes sense," she agreed. "I'll talk to Squirrelstar tomorrow."

A cool feeling of relief trickled through Nightheart's fur that Sunbeam hadn't tried to argue with him, but at the same time a hard knot of trepidation grew in his belly. He was worried that if Sunbeam found her kin in trouble, she would want to stay with them, or maybe bring them into ThunderClan.

And that wouldn't go down well with any cat!

Nightheart couldn't help remembering all the trouble he and Sunbeam had gone through to make sure they could live in the same Clan. He had hoped that their difficult days would be behind them now that Sunbeam had won the right to join ThunderClan.

But *new* difficult days just kept on coming.

Chapter 6

On the morning after her conversation with Nightheart, Sunbeam began the climb up the tumbled rocks that led to the Highledge and Squirrelstar's den. Every paw step grew harder and harder until she halted halfway up.

"This is stupid," she muttered to herself. "Squirrelstar will claw my ears off!"

Slowly she began to retrace her steps, but before she reached the ground she halted again. A picture formed in her mind of her mother lying injured—maybe dying—while her father and brother were unable to help her.

I have to do this.

Determinedly she began the climb again, but when she came within leaping distance of the Highledge, she hesitated once more. She was afraid that Squirrelstar would think she was disloyal to her new Clan if she wanted to leave it, even briefly, to help her kin.

While she still stood frozen, an irritable voice came from above her head. "Do you think I can't scent you? Stop dithering around and tell me what you want."

Ashamed of her indecision, Sunbeam leaped up to the Highledge and halted just inside the Clan leader's den. Squirrelstar was sitting in her nest, her tail curled around her forepaws. Brambleclaw dozed beside her.

"I'm loyal to ThunderClan!" Sunbeam blurted out. "I hope you don't doubt that, Squirrelstar."

"I didn't doubt it," Squirrelstar responded coolly. "Not until you made a point of saying it. What's going on?"

Sunbeam felt hot embarrassment flood through her body from ears to tail-tip. When she began to speak, she tried to sound confident, but she felt as though she were trying to force the words out around a tough bit of fresh-kill lodged in her throat.

"I heard that Berryheart, Sparrowtail, and Hollowspring are camping just outside WindClan territory," she explained. "I also heard that they're not doing well without their Clan, and that Berryheart has been injured. I'd like to go make sure that they're okay."

At first Squirrelstar did not respond; her head was bowed, and only her whiskers were quivering slightly. Sunbeam's belly began churning with anxiety.

Have I upset her? I've only just joined her Clan; she might not trust me yet.

Eventually Squirrelstar raised her head; to Sunbeam's surprise, her green gaze was warm and sympathetic. "I understand," she mewed. "This must be a stressful time for you. Not only are you getting used to being away from your kin—that would be bad enough—but now you're trying to cope with your kin being exiled by your former Clan."

"I'm not sure they're cut out for a rogue's life," Sunbeam murmured weakly.

Squirrelstar nodded. "It must be difficult. I'm sure you would do just about anything to make sure your kin are okay."

"I would," Sunbeam agreed, bracing herself to be completely honest with her Clan leader. She wasn't sure how Squirrelstar would react, but she deserved the truth. "I admit I considered sneaking out to see them, but Nightheart encouraged me to speak to you instead."

"Nightheart was right."

Squirrelstar's voice was cold, and Sunbeam's hopes of seeing her kin plummeted like a falling pinecone.

"Thank you, Squirrelstar. I'll—" Sunbeam was beginning, taking a pace backward, when Squirrelstar interrupted her.

"That really isn't something a loyal ThunderClan warrior would do, is it?" the Clan leader meowed. Her brilliant green gaze was fixed on Sunbeam. "Sneak off the territory without telling any cat? Just imagine. . . . And certainly," she went on, "if I ever caught you doing it, or heard from *some other cat* that you had disobeyed me, well . . . then we'd have a problem. Have I made myself clear, Sunbeam?"

Sunbeam stood rigid, staring into her leader's eyes. She had to be sure that she had understood Squirrelstar's tone correctly. This was very important.

"*Getting caught* crossing WindClan territory would be a very bad thing," the Clan leader added.

The words sounded as if Squirrelstar was telling her why she couldn't go to her kin. But the way that Bramblestar, still dozing

beside his mate, stirred and gave a slight snort of amusement, told Sunbeam that she was hearing a different meaning. She now heard the real meaning as clear as the calling of rooks around their nests. Squirrelstar was warning her how she needed to take care when going on her little quest. Her Clan leader couldn't officially give her permission, but she was expressing her approval in the only way she could. If any cat were to ask her what she said, Squirrelstar wouldn't have to lie. She could repeat every word that she had said, and it would sound as though she had expressly forbidden Sunbeam from seeking out her kin.

"I understand, Squirrelstar," Sunbeam murmured, letting her head droop as she backed out of the den. Outwardly she knew she must look desperately disappointed, but inwardly excitement surged through her, with a fierce resolve.

"Go, but don't get caught." Thank you, Squirrelstar!

"Are you sure you didn't misunderstand her?" Nightheart asked nervously. He and Sunbeam were resting in their nest after a long, successful hunting patrol with Wasp and Waffle observing. "If Squirrelstar was actually telling you *not* to go . . ."

"Don't you see? She *had* to say that," Sunbeam responded. "But I'm sure that secretly she approves."

Nightheart scuffled uncomfortably in the moss and bracken of his nest. "Now that I've had a chance to really think about it, I'm not sure I want you to go at all." Ignoring Sunbeam's shocked exclamation, he continued, "I know you love your kin, but Berryheart has brought a lot of trouble into your life recently. What if she pulls you into some other terrible conflict, or danger, now?"

Sunbeam tried to hide how disappointed she felt that the cat she loved more than any other wasn't supporting her. "This is something I have to do," she insisted. "I know that my mother can be a difficult cat to get along with sometimes—"

"'Difficult'? Try impossible," Nightheart muttered.

"I know," Sunbeam responded sympathetically, remembering the dangerous tasks Berryheart had set for Nightheart when he was trying to become a ShadowClan cat. "After what happened when she was sent into exile at that Gathering," she went on, "I'm not sure she

wants anything to do with me right now. But I still feel that I have to make sure that my kin are okay."

"I understand," Nightheart sighed, pressing his muzzle into Sunbeam's shoulder fur. "And I wish I could go with you. But I'm responsible for Wasp and Waffle now, so I have to stay here." A pang of guilt struck him at the thought that he had to do his duty when Sunbeam needed him to help her instead. *Just like my journey with Frostpaw.* "Maybe you should take another Clanmate," he continued. "What about Bayshine? At least that would mean that if you were to run into danger, you wouldn't have to face it alone."

Sunbeam shook her head. "I don't think Squirrelstar would like it if I took another warrior out of the territory. The fewer cats who know, the less likely it is that the Clan will find out, or that WindClan will catch us on the way. Besides," she added, "I wouldn't want to get Bayshine into trouble because of me. Honestly, Nightheart, I'll be fine on my own."

"Then be safe on your journey," Nightheart purred, nuzzling her shoulder again. "Go and find them and make sure they're okay and offer whatever help they need. But . . ." He hesitated and then went on, "You're not going to bring them back to ThunderClan, are you? It was tricky enough getting Squirrelstar and our Clanmates to agree to let Wasp and Waffle stay for a while, and Berryheart . . ."

Sunbeam let out a small *mrrow* of amusement. "I understand that Berryheart might not be the best visitor to a Clan in difficult times. But there's nothing to worry about. My mother is the most loyal ShadowClan cat there ever was. She was so loyal that it was her disapproval of Clans mingling that finally made her leave the Clan she loved. She would never ask to join any Clan but ShadowClan."

Wind tossed the branches as Sunbeam bounded through the forest, all her senses alert for possible dangers: Twolegs, dogs, or trespassing WindClan cats. Beneath the Ancient Oak she paused to catch her breath and taste the air. The strong scent of the WindClan border came from just ahead of her.

The most direct route would be to cross WindClan territory by following the lakeshore. That was allowed, as long as she didn't stray more than three tail-lengths from the water's edge and didn't

take prey. But then she would risk meeting a WindClan patrol, and they would be bound to ask her where she was going.

Like I'm going to tell WindClan my business!

Squirrelstar's implied permission had rested on the whole expedition being kept a secret. And Sunbeam had no intention of betraying her leader's trust by being caught on the neighboring Clan's territory.

Stifling a sigh at the thought of the distance she would have to cover, Sunbeam began to follow the boundary stream on the ThunderClan side until she reached WindClan's top border. Then she leaped the stream and set off across the moor, keeping a few fox-lengths just outside the WindClan border markers.

As she trekked over the tough moorland grass, her fur buffeted by the wind, Sunbeam reflected that this route meant it would take her longer to reach her kin, but it would keep her off WindClan territory, and she was unlikely to be spotted by any WindClan patrols who might demand to know what she was up to.

What could I tell them to explain why I'm so far from ThunderClan territory? she wondered. *With StarClan's help, it won't come to that!*

The sun was already beginning to dip down the sky by the time Sunbeam came off the moor. She could easily pick up the acrid tang of the Thunderpath beside the horseplace, and beyond it the musky scent of the horses. Sorting out other scents from the mixture that flowed into her jaws was more difficult, but at last she managed to discern the familiar scent of ShadowClan.

She was turning to follow it when she heard a loud yowl and spotted Smoky, the gray-and-white tom who lived at the horseplace. He was standing beside the fence, beckoning her with vigorous waves of his tail.

"You're a Clan cat, right?" Smoky asked as Sunbeam bounded up to him.

"Yes, I am," Sunbeam responded. "What do you want?" Her pads were prickling with impatience at the delay, but the horseplace cats had always been friendly, and she couldn't just ignore Smoky.

"I wanted to ask you about Frostpaw," Smoky replied. "Daisy comes and visits from time to time, but she hasn't been by recently, and I've been worrying about Frostpaw. She stayed here for a while

after she was injured, but we haven't heard anything about her since she left. Do you know if she's okay?"

"Yes, she's fine," Sunbeam replied. "You helped her, didn't you?" She remembered Frostpaw's explanation at the Gathering. "You had your Twolegs take her in and treat her."

Smoky nodded, flicking his ear uncomfortably. "She didn't want me to, but she was in such bad shape," he said apologetically. "And my kits, Little Daisy and Coriander, were worried that Whistlepaw couldn't heal her. And Whistlepaw was more upset than any cat. Frostpaw seemed better after the Twoleg treated her, but she left before she was really ready for travel. She wouldn't let any of us go with her. Anyway, it's a relief to hear she's okay."

Sunbeam's gaze turned warm as she listened to Smoky. *He's not a Clan cat, but he cares about us.* She was tempted to say more, but she knew it would only confuse and alarm him. There was no way she could explain to the horseplace cat about the trouble Frostpaw was in. "She's safe. She went away for a while, but she did what she needed to do and she's back now."

Smoky sighed, purring happily. "That is good news," he meowed. "Thanks—that's a load off my mind. I'll go and tell Coriander and Little Daisy."

He bounded away and disappeared into the barn.

When Smoky was gone, Sunbeam picked up the elusive traces of ShadowClan scent and headed in that direction. Her anticipation built as the scent became clearer and clearer. *Have I found them at last?* Finally, she stood at the top of a hollow and looked down on her kin.

Sunbeam's heart lifted at seeing that all three cats were still alive—but a moment later, her belly clenched when she noticed how skinny they looked. Berryheart was lying on her side, and Sunbeam could make out some kind of poultice plastered over her hindquarters. Sparrowtail was crouching beside her, gently licking her ears, while Hollowspring was trying to coax her to eat some small creature that he nudged close to her jaws. Berryheart only turned her head away.

As Sunbeam bounded down into the hollow, the scent of infection from her mother's wound flowed over her, drowning out all the other

scents.

This is worse than I thought!

“Berryheart, what happened?” she cried.

Sparrowtail and Hollowspring had been concentrating so closely on Berryheart that they hadn’t been aware of Sunbeam until she called out. Now they looked up, their faces blank with shock.

“Sunbeam!” Sparrowtail exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” Sunbeam told him, and repeated, “What happened?”

“We were foraging beside the Thunderpath,” her father explained, “and when we heard a monster coming, we all scattered. Berryheart didn’t move fast enough, and she lost her balance.”

Puzzled, Sunbeam glanced again at the wound on her mother’s hindquarters. “That doesn’t look like the kind of wound she would have if a monster struck her,” she mewed.

“It didn’t.” Hollowspring took up the story. “There was some of that sharp, transparent Twoleg stuff on the ground where Berryheart fell. I guess some Twolegs threw it out when they were riding inside their monster. We tried to get all of it out of the wound and Berryheart’s fur, but we can’t be sure we got it all. We put a poultice of marigold on it, but it’s still infected.”

Sunbeam wrinkled her nose against the smell, sickened at the thought of what her mother was going through. After what Breezepelt had told her, she had been afraid of something like this happening now that her family was living away from the lake. Within a Clan, Berryheart’s wound might have been cured quickly, but here there was no cat with the skill or the knowledge of herbs to treat it properly.

They need a medicine cat.

Then Sunbeam remembered what Smoky had told her: how he and his kits had cared for Frostpaw. “There are cats who live at the horseplace: Smoky, Coriander, and Little Daisy,” she meowed to her father. “Why don’t you go and ask them for help? They helped Frostpaw when she was hurt. They might be able to find you some better herbs, and they could certainly feed you.” She cast a glance at the scrawny shrew with which Hollowspring had tried tempting Berryheart. “I’m sure their barn is heaving with plump mice,” she finished. *And maybe they could set their Twolegs on you, like they*

did for Frostpaw. Sunbeam pushed down the tendril of guilt that rose up with that thought. Taking help from Twolegs was unacceptable to a Clan cat, but were her parents Clan cats anymore? *I just want my mother to survive.* And whatever Smoky had let his Twolegs do had saved Frostpaw.

Hollowspring and Sparrowtail exchanged a glance, and Hollowspring swiped his tongue over his lips, as if the thought of juicy fresh-kill was making his jaws water.

Berryheart raised her head a little, seeming to recognize Sunbeam for the first time. “I’m not going to beg for help from *them*,” she rasped. “They’re no better than kittypets! But it’s no more than I’d expect from you,” she added, letting her head fall back and closing her eyes.

Stung, Sunbeam dug her claws hard into the ground to stop herself from trading insults with her mother. “You don’t have a lot of choices,” she pointed out firmly. “If you don’t want to go to the horseplace, then why not head back to ShadowClan and ask Tigerstar for help from the medicine cats? He might not let you rejoin the Clan, but I’m sure he’d be okay with that.”

Berryheart glared at Sunbeam from narrowed eyes. “This is all Tigerstar’s fault!” she snarled. “If he hadn’t cast me out, I wouldn’t have been on that Thunderpath in the first place.”

Sunbeam couldn’t suppress a heavy sigh. Her heart was weighed down by sadness and dread. It felt as though there would be no way back into warrior life for her kin, not while Berryheart’s attitude was so hostile. Besides, Berryheart had conspired with Splashtail and had worked against ShadowClan. Sunbeam couldn’t imagine how ShadowClan could ever take her back.

After Berryheart’s exile, Sunbeam had dismissed Splashtail’s plotting as unimportant. But now that the RiverClan tom had become Clan leader, she realized that she had been wrong.

“Berryheart, what do you know about Splashtail’s scheming in RiverClan?” she asked her mother. “You know he’s declared himself leader, right?”

Berryheart huffed her breath out scornfully. “Why should we care about the Clans now?” she demanded.

“Some cats suspect Splashtail isn’t honest,” Sunbeam responded. “And that he doesn’t mean to lead his Clan like a leader should. You spent time with him, Berryheart; did he ever tell you anything about what he really wants?”

Berryheart shook her head, half sitting up, then groaned as if the movement hurt her. “I only allied myself with Splashtail to get Tigerstar out of RiverClan,” she snapped. “And that didn’t work. Do you think I want to hear the mange-pelt’s name spoken?”

Sunbeam glanced from Berryheart to Sparrowtail and back again. Both her parents looked resolute, but while her mother showed only stubbornness, there was indecision in her father’s eyes. He and Hollowspring were clearly trying to pretend that they could cope with their new life, but just as clearly, they were worried.

“Hollowspring, why don’t you and I try to find something to help Berryheart,” Sunbeam suggested. “Some more herbs, maybe, or some prey.”

“The prey around here is rubbish,” Hollowspring snorted, but then he shrugged and muttered agreement. He followed Sunbeam out of the hollow.

Once they were out of their parents’ earshot, Sunbeam turned to face her brother. “Now tell me the truth. I can tell that things are not right with you.”

Hollowspring sighed, his shoulders drooping and his tail trailing on the ground. “It’s been tough since we struck out on our own,” he confessed. “There’s not much prey, and . . . well, I miss my Clan. I think Berryheart does, too, though we both know she would never admit it.”

“True,” Sunbeam mewed.

“Her injury has kept her lying still for the last day or so,” Hollowspring went on, “and that’s given her a lot of time to dwell on things. It’s only made her more and more bitter and resentful.”

Sunbeam couldn’t find any way to reply to that. Instead she concentrated on hunting, managing to trap a mouse beside the horseplace fence, and a skinny vole closer to the lake. She suspected that so many creatures found a comfortable and fairly safe home in the horseplace barn that there were slim pickings out here in the open.

She also spotted a clump of horsetail and was biting off a few stems to add to Berryheart's poultice when Hollowspring came padding back to her, discouragement in every line of his body.

"I chased a rabbit," he meowed, "but it ran onto WindClan territory. I couldn't follow it there."

Sunbeam wondered whether rogues would be so careful about crossing Clan boundaries, but she knew that her brother and all her kin were Clan cats at heart. They could no more steal prey from WindClan than they could fly.

"Never mind, I caught these," she told him, waving her tail to where she had left her fresh-kill and dropping the horsetail at his paws. "They should help. But now I'd better be getting back."

Hollowspring's eyes stretched wide in shock. "I was hoping you would stay with us," he mewed, "at least for a while."

Sunbeam shook her head. "I'm sorry, I can't. I've already been away from ThunderClan for so long, I'll have questions to answer when I get back. I'd better go—but I promise I'll come and see you soon."

The sun was going down, lighting up streaks of crimson across the sky, as Sunbeam headed back toward ThunderClan. She was so worried and distracted by what she had seen that she entirely forgot that she was supposed to be taking the long way back across the moor. She only realized her mistake when she ended up beside the broken half-bridge that signaled the beginning of WindClan territory.

The border markers had faded, but Sunbeam tasted fresh cat-scent, growing stronger with every heartbeat. "StarClan!" she gasped. "I shouldn't be here!"

For a moment she froze, as the cat-scent engulfed her and she heard meows coming from the approaching patrol. Then, forcing her paws to move, she doubled back and raced for the horseplace and the chestnut tree that grew close to the fence.

Sunbeam hurled herself up the trunk and into the branches. When she turned to look back, peering out through the thick foliage, the WindClan cats were already in sight.

Flutterfoot was in the lead, with Brindlewing and Sedgewhisker. While Sedgewhisker renewed the scent marker, Flutterfoot stood erect, his jaws parted to taste the air.

“Can you smell something . . . strange?” he asked his companions.

The two she-cats stood sniffing, while Sunbeam’s breath came so fast and harsh, she was afraid the WindClan cats would hear it. Even though she was officially outside the territory, she had been pretty close to the border, and she didn’t want the cats asking awkward questions.

“I can’t smell anything except our scent markers,” Brindlewing mewed at last.

“Nor can I,” Sedgewhisker agreed. “Come on, Flutterfoot. We’ve got the rest of the border to cover.”

The brown-and-white tom stood still for a moment, then shrugged. “I must be imagining things. Let’s go.”

Sunbeam stayed up the tree until the WindClan patrol had disappeared and she had stopped shaking.

“That was close,” she whispered to herself. “Too close!”

Chapter 7

“Do something about your fur, Shadowsight,” Puddleshine meowed. “You’ve got bits of watermint all over it. You can’t go to the Moonpool looking like that.”

“Okay,” Shadowsight responded amiably.

He gave himself a vigorous shake, sending a cloud of leaf debris into the air. Puddleshine leaped back out of range, then turned his head to give himself a quick grooming.

Frostpaw sat watching the two medicine cats a few tail-lengths away. She knew that this was the night of the half-moon meeting at the Moonpool. Puddleshine and Shadowsight looked ready to set out, and her heart ached with longing to go with them.

Taking a deep breath, she padded over. “May I please come with you?” she asked with a polite dip of her head.

Shadowsight opened his jaws to reply, then closed them again and glanced at Puddleshine, as the senior medicine cat. Hope thrilled through Frostpaw as she waited for their decision.

I want to go, so, so much!

“I’m not sure,” Puddleshine meowed at last. “You’re not any Clan’s official medicine cat.”

“She does have a connection to StarClan, though,” Shadowsight pointed out.

He believes me! Relief flooded through Frostpaw, making her even more desperate to go to the Moonpool and meet with her warrior ancestors again.

Puddleshine seemed to be pondering deeply, his gaze fixed on his paws. Frostpaw felt her pads prickle with nervousness.

At last, the sleek-furred brown-and-white tom shook his head, and Frostpaw’s hope vanished like morning mist.

“If you were to go, it would cause too much upheaval at the meeting,” Puddleshine declared. “And it might make the other medicine cats nervous about how RiverClan’s new leader would react.”

“But—” Frostpaw began. She felt her shoulder fur begin to bristle with annoyance. *Can’t he see how important this is to me?* At the

Moonpool, she might be able to talk to Mothwing, too, and find out what Splashtail was up to in RiverClan.

"I'm sorry, Frostpaw," Puddleshine interrupted. "It really isn't a good idea for you to go along. As ShadowClan's senior medicine cat, I can't allow it. Come on, Shadowsight." He headed toward the camp entrance. Shadowsight cast a sympathetic glance at Frostpaw and followed.

Frostpaw's annoyance was replaced by determination. "Wait," she mewed. "I'm not officially ShadowClan, am I? I'm loyal to RiverClan—the true RiverClan—in my heart. If any cat at the Moonpool has a problem with me turning up, I'll make it clear it was my decision, and nothing to do with you."

Puddleshine had halted as she spoke and stood looking back at her. An awkward silence dragged on for several heartbeats. At last, it was Shadowsight who replied.

"I know what it's like to carry the burden of secrets when no cat is listening to you or taking you seriously," he murmured gently. "Whether we believe Frostpaw or not—and I do—it's best to have her story out in the open. Then we can discuss it and maybe work out what is really going on in RiverClan."

"And hedgehogs fly," Puddleshine sighed under his breath, while Frostpaw blinked in gratitude at Shadowsight for his support. "Okay," the medicine cat added aloud. "I know I won't be able to talk either of you out of it now, so you might as well come along, Frostpaw. But don't blame me if it all goes wrong."

The half-moon was floating in the sky by the time Frostpaw pushed through the bushes that barred the way to the Moonpool. Its light glinted silver on the cascade that flowed down the rock face and shimmered on the surface of the water. Frostpaw drew a deep breath. In all her travels she had never seen anything half so beautiful.

Alderheart and Jayfeather of ThunderClan were already sitting beside the Moonpool. The SkyClan medicine cats, Frecklewish and Fidgetflake, sat beside them. Kestrelflight from WindClan was standing by himself a short distance away; Frostpaw couldn't see his apprentice, Whistlepaw, anywhere.

A worm of guilt stirred in her belly. Was Kestrelflight still so angry with Whistlepaw that he had forbidden her to come to the meeting?

Mothwing and Podlight were missing, too. Frostpaw bit back a hiss of annoyance. She had counted on speaking to Mothwing, and she had been curious to see how Podlight would behave at the meeting. Now she could only swallow her disappointment that neither cat had bothered to show up. Part of her was relieved that there wouldn't be any upheaval from RiverClan, as Puddleshine had feared, but at the same time she was uneasy at the idea of her Clan drifting further and further away from the others, and from StarClan.

Did they not come because Podlight doesn't have visions? she asked herself. *Splashtail will never get his nine lives if RiverClan doesn't have a true medicine cat with a connection to StarClan. Or is that really his plan?*

Puddleshine and Shadowsight were already making their way down the spiral path to join their fellow medicine cats beside the Moonpool. Frostpaw followed, her paws slipping into the dimples left by long-ago cats who had come to this special place.

Distracted by her worries over RiverClan, Frostpaw padded up to the other cats without realizing what they were talking about. Only when Alderheart meowed, "Of course she should stay," did she realize that they were debating whether she had the right to be there. She halted at the edge of the group and stood rigid, her head high, ready to defy any of them if they told her to leave.

"Does it really make sense to turn away a cat who has a connection to StarClan?" Frecklewish asked. "Even if she isn't officially part of any Clan?"

"But can we be sure she really has a connection to StarClan?" Fidgetflake objected. "Frostpaw herself has changed her mind about that, more than once."

I am right here, you know, Frostpaw thought, digging her claws into the ground to hold back fury. *I can hear every word you're saying!*

"Kestrelflight, what do you think?" Frecklewish asked, turning to the WindClan medicine cat.

The mottled gray tom shrugged and turned away to stare into the waters of the Moonpool. "The medicine cats of my Clan have already

done enough to help Frostpaw," he muttered. "Maybe too much."

"Jayfeather?" Alderheart queried.

Every cat's gaze turned toward the blind tom. Frostpaw suppressed a shiver; somehow she knew that if Jayfeather ordered her to leave, she would have to obey him, even though he had no authority over her.

For a moment he did not speak, until Alderheart prompted him again. "What do you think?"

"I think you all have bees in your brain!" Jayfeather retorted with an irritable lash of his tail. "Why are we sitting here wasting moonlight when it's not our decision to make? If StarClan doesn't want Frostpaw here, I'm sure they'll make that clear."

Frostpaw sensed relief spreading through the group, that no cat had to make the decision to banish her. Her anger vanished, and she felt an excited purr rising in her throat. This was her first Moonpool meeting since she had discovered she had a true connection to StarClan.

Will I see Riverstar again?

Exchanging an awkward glance with Kestrelflight, Frostpaw hoped that Whistlepaw wasn't being punished too badly for protecting her. She didn't know Kestrelflight or Harestar well, so she couldn't guess what sort of punishments they might come up with. Being left out of the half-moon meeting was bad enough.

"Well, are we going to begin, or are we going to sit around counting our paws?" Jayfeather snapped.

"Shouldn't we wait for Podlight and Mothwing?" Frecklewish asked. "It's Podlight's first half-moon meeting. Mothwing should present him to StarClan as her apprentice."

"I want to know if Podlight has brought Splashtail here to receive his nine lives," Puddleshine added. "And if not, why not?"

An uneasy murmur broke out among the medicine cats. "He must have, surely," Alderheart meowed. "Every new leader is eager to meet with StarClan."

Every true *leader,* Frostpaw thought, exchanging a glance with Shadowsight. *But a cat who murdered his way to the leadership might think twice.*

“How long do you want to wait?” Jayfeather demanded, his tone more abrasive than ever. “We should be—”

He broke off at the sound of cats pushing their way through the bushes at the top of the hollow. Every cat looked up to see Mothwing heading down the spiral path. Podlight was padding in her paw steps.

Frostpaw felt her belly tense at the sight of them, even though Jayfeather and the others had allowed her to stay. Podlight might want her thrown out, and Mothwing might have to agree with him, so as not to give herself away. *I don’t care what they say,* she thought determinedly. *I’m not leaving!*

“Nice of you to show up,” Jayfeather snorted as the two RiverClan cats reached the side of the pool. “I was beginning to think that RiverClan might have changed their minds about their medicine cat *again*.”

Podlight turned his head away, clearly intimidated by the abrasive ThunderClan tom. Mothwing, however, faced Jayfeather, undaunted by his harsh tone.

“You’ll have to get used to us,” she responded coolly.

“Maybe. But it’s very convenient, isn’t it?” Jayfeather remarked. “Podlight suddenly has visions out of nowhere that immediately choose a new leader for RiverClan. And that leader just happens to be the young tom who made it so obvious he wanted the role. Have you anything to say to that, Podlight?”

For a moment Podlight looked as if he might shrink under the blind cat’s questioning, but before he could make any reply, Alderheart took a pace toward him, dipping his head politely. “Suppose you tell us about your visions,” he suggested, in a much more gentle tone than Jayfeather’s.

Podlight straightened up. “Of course, I can do that,” he meowed. “Let’s see . . . Just after ShadowClan finally left, we were almost out of marigold. I had a dream that there were clumps of it farther downstream, and when I went to look, there they were. That was just the day before Duskfur tore her paw on some bramble tendrils and needed a poultice. And I had a vision where I saw Twolegs dropping shiny things with sharp edges on the lakeshore. That happened a

couple of days later, and so we were able to move them before any cat was injured."

Several of the medicine cats were nodding and letting out impressed murmurs as Podlight was speaking. Even Frostpaw admitted to herself that his account sounded plausible.

"So you see," Mothwing meowed, "our warrior ancestors are speaking to Podlight."

Frostpaw gave Mothwing a doubtful glance, a little surprised at the firmness of the medicine cat's tone.

"They are," Podlight responded. He turned a contemptuous glare on Frostpaw. "*She* is the only RiverClan medicine cat who's had false visions."

Frostpaw was taken aback by the suddenness of Podlight's attack. She knew from the Gathering that he didn't like her, but still, she'd hoped that he would be more accepting here, where she was less of a threat. Stung, she stood a little taller as she faced him. "To begin with, I was manipulated by my mother," she retorted. "No cat is manipulating me now."

"You're responsible for your own decisions." Podlight still sounded hostile. "Just like any cat. And you have made some very bad ones."

"Really?" Frostpaw felt her shoulder fur begin to rise in anger. "Then what do you think about *this*? I had a vision where Riverstar, the first leader of our Clan, came to speak with me. And he showed me how Reedwhisker died. Splashtail killed him!"

An uncomfortable silence followed Frostpaw's words. All the medicine cats had heard her accusation at the Gathering, and Frostpaw guessed that some of them hadn't decided yet whether they believed her.

Ignoring their dismay, Frostpaw raised her voice to add, "My visions are *real*!"

Mothwing stepped forward, looking annoyed. "Nonsense," she scoffed. "Splashtail wouldn't murder a cat. He's been chosen by StarClan."

Frostpaw hesitated, fixing her gaze on Mothwing and wondering whether the golden-furred she-cat really believed what she had just

said, and if she'd been lying when they spoke together outside the RiverClan camp.

"Podlight," Fidgetflake meowed, "are you sure that Splashtail is the right leader for RiverClan?"

Podlight hesitated for a moment, then huffed out a breath. "I am. Frostpaw has to be inventing these visions," he declared. "She's done that before, don't forget. Remember how much trouble she caused in RiverClan after Mistystar died."

An uneasy murmur rippled through the assembled medicine cats.

"Why would Frostpaw do that?" Alderheart asked Podlight calmly.

"I don't know," Podlight responded. "I'm not even sure she knows she's lying. The poor cat has certainly been through a lot in her young life, witnessing her mother's death, living in exile . . ."

Frostpaw clamped her jaws shut, forcing back an indignant response at Podlight's sickly sympathetic tone. *Like he cares!* She realized that he sounded just like Splashtail, and guessed that the false leader had instructed him how to respond if she showed up at the Moonpool.

"Maybe Frostpaw just doesn't know what is real anymore," Podlight continued. "It's true that a cat did terrible things in pursuit of the leadership of RiverClan, but that wasn't Splashtail. I'm sad to say it was my littermate, Curlfeather." He looked down at his paws, affecting deep sorrow. "How she became a ruthless killer, we'll never know."

If she hadn't been standing beside the Moonpool, in the place that all cats revered, Frostpaw might have launched an attack on Podlight. *Curlfeather wasn't the only ruthless one! It was both of them.*

An uneasy silence fell over the medicine cats; eventually it was Kestrelflight who broke it.

"Why are we digging our claws in over this?" he asked the others. "At this point it's just Frostpaw's word against Podlight's and Splashtail's. Why not do what we came to do, and commune with StarClan? *They* must know the truth, and if they have nothing to say, well, we have our answer, and we should all be grateful that RiverClan finally has a medicine cat and a leader."

Frecklewish and Fidgetflake murmured their agreement; Puddleshine and Shadowsight glanced at each other, then nodded.

"I wish *I* could agree with you, Kestrelflight," Jayfeather snapped. "But Splashtail is *not* a proper leader, not until he is granted his nine lives by StarClan. Has that happened yet?"

For the first time, Podlight looked thoroughly flustered. "No, it hasn't," he admitted.

Frostpaw looked at him with satisfaction. *Of course it hasn't.* But his words provoked an outcry from all the medicine cats; they gazed at Podlight with stunned expressions.

"RiverClan's *entire problem* has been that it hasn't had a leader chosen by StarClan!" Kestrelflight yowled. "Isn't that right? And now Podlight thinks he has found the right leader, and he *hasn't* brought Splashtail here to the Moonpool to get his nine lives?"

"He's been working on strengthening the Clan," Podlight meowed defensively.

"Oh, that excuse won't work," Frecklewish flashed back at him. "What would strengthen your Clan more than having a real leader?"

"Well . . ." For a heartbeat Podlight seemed lost for words. "The—the weather has been overcast," he stammered at last. "Clouds have covered the moon. Splashtail and I want to wait for a clear night."

"Thistle-fluff!" Jayfeather lashed his tail angrily. "There have been several clear nights since the Gathering. How clear does it have to be? StarClan can reach you even if there's a cloud or two in the sky!"

Frostpaw felt a prickle of excitement all through her pelt at the way Splashtail seemed to be refusing to go to the Moonpool.

Maybe, she hoped, *that will be his undoing as leader.*

Then it dawned on her that her hope might be false. When she had spied on the RiverClan camp, she had suspected that Splashtail didn't plan to ever meet with StarClan but was determined to remain leader anyway.

Is that why Mothwing looks so uncomfortable? she wondered. The medicine cat was working her claws into the earth at the edge of the pool. She wasn't trying to speak up for Podlight. Even though Mothwing didn't communicate with StarClan herself, she still acknowledged that it was important for RiverClan to have a leader chosen by the spirits of their warrior ancestors. *She knows Splashtail*

is afraid of what StarClan will say, Frostpaw realized. *So he doesn't intend to let them say anything at all.*

Mothwing hadn't been lying when she and Frostpaw had talked near the RiverClan camp, but she had to pretend to believe Podlight, or he would report back to Splashtail.

"You need to insist that Splashtail go to the Moonpool to get his nine lives," Alderheart told Podlight.

"Yes," Frecklewish agreed. "Remember that Leafstar supports Splashtail, in spite of Frostpaw's allegations, but that could change if he doesn't get StarClan's approval."

"That's the whole problem, isn't it?" Jayfeather growled. "Either Podlight or Frostpaw is a fake medicine cat and is lying. And right now, I'm betting that it's Podlight who's the liar."

Podlight glared at the blind tom, his lips drawn back in the beginning of a snarl, but he didn't try to defend himself.

Frostpaw saw her chance and stepped forward to face the rest of the medicine cats. "I am a *real* RiverClan medicine cat," she insisted. "And I suspect the reason that Splashtail won't come here to meet with StarClan is because he knows they won't approve of what he's done."

"You're no longer RiverClan," Podlight sneered. "You can't speak for us. *I* am the new medicine cat for RiverClan."

"Yes, he is." Mothwing supported her Clanmate. "And if you don't mind, Frostpaw, I would like to introduce Podlight to StarClan as a new apprentice, as is the custom."

No cat protested, though Frostpaw spotted some uneasy glances. Her excitement mounted as she wondered if StarClan would send some kind of sign to show that they rejected Podlight as a medicine cat. She wondered if Podlight suspected the same; he was certainly looking worried.

"Podlight," Mothwing began, "is it your wish to enter into the mysteries of StarClan as a medicine cat?"

Podlight swallowed. His voice rasped as he replied, "It is."

"Then come forward." Mothwing beckoned with her tail, padding to the edge of the Moonpool and waiting until Podlight stood beside her. The moonlight cast a silver sheen over their fur and lit their eyes so that they looked like small moons.

“Warriors of StarClan,” Mothwing continued, “I present to you this apprentice. He has chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant him your wisdom and insight so that he may understand your ways and heal his Clan in accordance with your will.”

Frostpaw strained all her senses to hear if there was any response from StarClan. But the stars remained silent, unmoving.

At the end of the ceremony the other medicine cats would usually congratulate the new apprentice, and maybe call out their name as the Clans did for the making of a warrior. But this time, no cat spoke; Frostpaw guessed that whatever they might say, they all had their doubts that Podlight’s calling as a medicine cat was real.

“Now it’s time for us to meet with StarClan,” Puddleshine announced at last. “But before we do,” he added, turning to Podlight, “I strongly suggest that you convince Splashtail to come here to the Moonpool as soon as possible. If he doesn’t—”

“If he doesn’t,” Jayfeather interrupted, “we’ll have to assume that he’s a fraud.”

There was fury in Podlight’s gaze, and his tail bushed up to twice its size. He glanced around at the other medicine cats, but it was obvious that all of them agreed with Jayfeather.

“Okay . . . I’ll talk to Splashtail,” he snarled. “Happy now?”

Puddleshine did not respond. Instead he led the way to the edge of the Moonpool so that they could meet with StarClan. Frostpaw crouched down beside him and touched her nose to the water.

At once a dark cloud enveloped her and icy cold spread through all her body. A claw of fear gripped her; this was so different from her experience when she had first come to the Moonpool.

But after several heartbeats, the darkness cleared, and a gentle warmth drove the chill from her limbs. Frostpaw found herself standing beside a river. Lush grass stretched as far as she could see, dotted here and there with copses of trees and bushes. The sun shone down with a sharp, cool light.

Frostpaw took a deep breath, reveling in the freshly scented air and the rushing of the river over its stony bed. But she hardly had time to take in everything before the sky darkened and a shadow fell over the water. Looking up, Frostpaw saw that—although a

heartbeat before, the sky had been clear—a black storm cloud, bulging with rain, had moved over the sun.

Cold invaded Frostpaw's body again, and her spirit was daunted by the change. As she stood gazing at the river, she saw the waters part until a deep chasm opened in the center of the current.

Frostpaw perched on a stone at the water's edge and peered downward, expecting to see all the way down to the riverbed. But instead she saw only darkness, as if the chasm stretched down and down and there was no bottom to it. The river began to flow into the abyss, until it seemed to Frostpaw that it would drain away completely.

Then in an eyeblink she found herself back on the bank of the Moonpool. Shivering with shock, she gasped for breath and looked around to see her fellow medicine cats stirring from their own trances.

As they came fully awake, Frostpaw waited for the others to report dark visions like the one she had seen. But no cat did. Both Fidgetflake and Frecklewish told about speaking with Echosong, the first medicine cat of the re-formed SkyClan. Alderheart and Jayfeather had spoken with Leafpool, a former ThunderClan medicine cat. Kestrelflight refused to say what he had seen, but Frostpaw didn't think he looked particularly uneasy. Puddleshine reported a vision about dogs near the ShadowClan border. Podlight said that he had found himself standing in the RiverClan camp, with the sun shining and his Clanmates sharing prey from a massive fresh-kill pile.

I bet he did, Frostpaw thought.

"So what did you see?" Alderheart asked, turning to Frostpaw.

For a heartbeat Frostpaw hesitated. She wished that she had gone first, and especially that she had spoken before Podlight. She knew that because of the tension between herself and the so-called RiverClan medicine cat, the others would probably treat her report with suspicion.

But I can't keep this vision to myself.

Bracing herself, she described the field and the river, and how a shadow had fallen over the sunlit territory before a chasm had opened up in the river and the water began to drain away.

When she had finished, Frostpaw glanced around the group of medicine cats. What she saw did not encourage her. Fidgetflake and Frecklewish were exchanging doubtful glances, while Kestrelflight was openly shaking his head.

“That’s just bat droppings,” Podlight meowed contemptuously, and Mothwing did not protest.

“I think this vision should be taken seriously,” Alderheart declared at last. Shadowsight nodded in agreement. “If she’s telling the truth,” Alderheart continued, “it would seem that RiverClan is in danger of disappearing.”

“What makes you think that?” Mothwing asked sharply.

“Because in my vision the river was disappearing into the earth,” Frostpaw pointed out.

Frecklewish turned to her with a dubious expression. “Aren’t you forgetting something? What fell upon the river right before it disappeared?”

A chill of dread rose from Frostpaw’s paws to invade her whole body. She knew where this discussion was going, and she was powerless to stop it.

“A shadow,” Frecklewish went on. “And who has been hanging around RiverClan lately? ShadowClan! I’m not sure if your visions are real,” she told Frostpaw uneasily, “but if they are, they seem to be warnings not to let ShadowClan get too close.”

“ShadowClan is no longer on RiverClan territory,” Puddleshine pointed out, an edge to his tone.

Frecklewish ignored him. “Could the vision even refer to Frostpaw *being* the shadow in RiverClan? After all, ShadowClan is where she sought refuge.”

“Do you have bees in your brain?” Jayfeather challenged the SkyClan medicine cat. “You must think Frostpaw has the intelligence of a flea if you’re accusing her of making up a vision that puts the blame for her Clan’s troubles right in her own paws!”

Frecklewish drew in an outraged breath, then turned her back on Jayfeather, her shoulder fur bristling angrily.

“Let’s calm down,” Alderheart mewed. “I’m convinced that Frostpaw is an honorable cat, and a genuine medicine cat. She wouldn’t invent something like this.”

“I don’t doubt Frostpaw genuinely believes in her own visions,” Kestrelflight declared. “But—well, StarClan hasn’t rejected Podlight. Perhaps that means they will accept Splashtail as well. RiverClan would certainly be stronger for it.”

“StarClan has given no sign that they reject Podlight,” Mothwing added, with a nod of acknowledgment to Kestrelflight.

“But I’ve spent a lot of time with Frostpaw recently,” Shadowsight pointed out. “I’m convinced she has a true gift.”

“You yourself can’t commune with StarClan any longer,” Fidgetflake mewed gently. “So now you might be seeing a connection where there isn’t one.”

Shadowsight shook his head. “Just because I can’t reach StarClan, that doesn’t mean I can’t recognize a cat who *can*,” he insisted.

Jayfeather turned his head toward Puddleshine, as though his blank blue eyes could focus on the ShadowClan medicine cat. “Well, Puddleshine?” he asked harshly. “You’re very quiet over there. What do you have to say?”

With every cat’s gaze on him, Puddleshine remained impassive. “Very little,” he responded. “I mean to wait for a definite sign from StarClan before I voice an opinion. And I suggest every cat do the same.”

Silence followed his words. Frostpaw, who had struggled with a mixture of anger, fear, and relief during the argument, was thankful for the ShadowClan tom’s decision.

Surely StarClan can’t stay silent for much longer, with a false leader and a false medicine cat in charge of RiverClan!

It was Mothwing who broke the silence. “I’m sure all the Clan’s troubles will begin fading away once Splashtail gets his nine lives. So Podlight and I will strongly suggest that he come to the Moonpool on the next clear night. Then any doubts about Splashtail being the rightful leader will be put to rest for good.”

Chapter 8

Sunlight warmed Nightheart's fur where he sat just outside the medicine cats' den. To any cat watching him, he hoped that he seemed absorbed in giving himself a thorough grooming, his head turned to pass his tongue down his flank in long, slow licks. He was trying to appear calm, but tension was roiling through him like a never-ending peal of thunder. The grooming wasn't his real purpose. What he was really doing was keeping watch for the return of Jayfeather and Alderheart from their herb-gathering expedition. If they appeared at the end of the thorn tunnel, he would have to warn Sunbeam, who was inside the den, raiding their store of herbs.

Nightheart understood that Sunbeam wanted to aid her mother, and he knew very well that it was hopeless to ask Squirrelstar or the medicine cats for herbs to help rogue cats who had quarreled with Tigerstar and abandoned their Clan.

I wish we didn't have to sneak around so much. I want to spend time with her in ThunderClan, being warriors together.

But Nightheart wouldn't even try to talk Sunbeam out of caring for her kin, who were still in their temporary camp beside the horseplace.

"Come on, Sunbeam, hurry up," he muttered to himself. "Please . . ."

The words were hardly out when he spotted a flash of dark ginger at the mouth of the tunnel that announced Alderheart's return; he was closely followed by Jayfeather. Both cats had large bunches of herbs clamped in their jaws.

"Sunbeam, they're here," Nightheart murmured, hoping she could hear his warning.

A frantic hiss came back through the brambles that screened the entrance to the den. "Stall them!"

Nightheart felt his heart leap in his chest. "How can I do that?"

"Figure it out!" Sunbeam's voice was taut with tension.

Great StarClan, help me!

Nightheart bounded across the camp, making sure to intercept the two medicine cats before they could approach their den. As he

skidded to a halt, Jayfeather turned blind blue eyes in his direction. Even though the medicine cat couldn't see him, Nightheart shivered at the feeling that Jayfeather was seeing *through* him.

"What do you want, Nightheart?" the senior medicine cat asked, setting down his bundle.

Nightheart felt a twinge of panic, wishing he could have come up with an idea in the few heartbeats it had taken him to cross the stone hollow.

But I can't!

"I . . . I'm worried about Frostpaw," he stammered, saying the first words that came into his mind. "We got to be good friends on our journey. Did you see her at the half-moon meeting? I haven't had the chance to speak with you since you got back, but I've meaning to ask: Do you think she's doing okay, with everything that's going on?"

Jayfeather let out a grunt, as if he was surprised that Nightheart had asked a sensible question. Nightheart felt a gentle swell of relief in his chest at having come up with the question out of thin air.

Not exactly thin air, he thought to himself. *I really* am *worried about Frostpaw.*

"I wouldn't worry," Jayfeather replied. "Frostpaw is a strong young cat. She's had to be, because of everything that she's already gone through in her young life. Troubles that would have destroyed a weaker cat. And that reminds me . . . ," he added, half to himself.

The blind tom turned and headed with purposeful paw steps toward the tumbled rocks that led up to Squirrelstar's den. Alderheart collected Jayfeather's herbs as well as his own, dropped them just outside his den, then followed his mentor. After a moment's hesitation, curious to know if the senior medicine cat had something to tell their Clan leader about Frostpaw, Nightheart slunk furtively after them.

As he climbed the rocks, he was thankful to spot Sunbeam emerging from behind the bramble screen, a leaf wrap in her jaws, and sneaking off behind the warriors' den.

Nightheart halted a tail-length below the Highledge, where he could listen to what Jayfeather had to say to Squirrelstar, but—he hoped—wouldn't be seen or scented.

“Squirrelstar, I’ve already told you what happened at the half-moon meeting,” Jayfeather began. “And I want to make it absolutely clear that I believe Frostpaw. Something *has* to be done about Splashtail.”

Alderheart’s softer tones followed. “I think he’s right, Squirrelstar. There’s no telling the damage Splashtail could do unless some cat stops him.”

Nightheart heard a sigh of exasperation from Squirrelstar. “I’ll say this just once more,” she meowed. “I agree that Frostpaw is telling the truth. But it’s up to RiverClan to solve the problem for themselves. ThunderClan—or any Clan—turning up and yowling at RiverClan is only going to cause problems. Look what happened when Tigerstar moved his warriors into their camp.”

Jayfeather let out a soft growl. “I thought you would be a more decisive leader than Brambleclaw,” he grunted. “Less afraid to cause a stir.”

Silence followed the medicine cat’s words. Nightheart could imagine Squirrelstar fixing him with an icy green glare. “You’re entitled to your opinion, Jayfeather,” she meowed firmly after a moment. “But I’m the cat with *star* after my name. I understand your concern, but I don’t want to make a bad situation worse. I’d be risking ThunderClan lives over something that isn’t a ThunderClan issue—not yet, anyway.”

“It’s your decision, Squirrelstar.” Jayfeather’s tone was heavily disapproving, even though he had to give in.

Nightheart’s head was spinning with a mixture of relief and concern: relief that he had saved Sunbeam from discovery, and concern that there would be trouble in the Clan if their leader was clashing with her medicine cats.

He dodged behind a rock as the two medicine cats passed him on their way down from the den, then ventured up to the Highledge and stood at the den opening. “Squirrelstar, may I please speak with you?” he asked.

The Clan leader was crouching beside her nest; it looked as if the medicine cats had interrupted her eating a vole. Nightheart’s pelt prickled with embarrassment that he was doing exactly the same thing.

“Is this about Frostpaw?” she asked. Her tone was cool, so Nightheart was unable to tell whether she was annoyed with him or not.

“Yes, Squirrelstar,” he replied. “I’m very worried about her.”

“Have you spoken to her recently?” Squirrelstar asked. “Do you have any reason to think she isn’t all right? Has she had any more visions?”

“I haven’t seen her since the Gathering,” Nightheart admitted. “Honestly, I’m just worried about how she’s coping with everything she has to deal with now. Living in a different Clan, being accused of lying . . .”

Squirrelstar gazed thoughtfully at her paws for a long moment. Finally she shook her head, half confused, half exasperated. “I think I need to hear from Frostpaw herself,” she announced. “I will go to ShadowClan . . . and you can come with me, Nightheart.”

Nightheart felt a pulse of shock at the sudden decision, along with gratitude that his Clan leader was taking his worries seriously. “Sure, Squirrelstar,” he mewed. “When do you want to go?”

Squirrelstar ate the last mouthful of her vole, then rose to her paws and gave her pelt a shake. “I’m ready now,” she declared.

She headed past Nightheart and ran lightly down the tumbled rocks. Nightheart followed her, then halted at the bottom. He spotted Sunbeam innocently washing her paws outside the warriors’ den; he would have liked to ask her if she had found what she was looking for in the herb store, but he didn’t dare speak to her under Squirrelstar’s gaze. At least she wasn’t going to get into trouble for being caught in the medicine cats’ den.

And now I have to leave, instead of helping her.

“What are you waiting for?” Squirrelstar asked, with an irritable twitch of her tail-tip.

Nightheart had to think quickly. “I need to check on Wasp and Waffle,” he responded. “I want to let them know I’ll be gone for a while.”

“Then do it,” Squirrelstar snapped. “Just be quick about it.” Waving her tail, she beckoned Ivypool, who was sharing fresh-kill with Sparkpelt and Finchlight. “I have to leave camp,” she announced. “You will be in charge of ThunderClan while I’m away.”

The two park cats were sharing tongues in a sunny spot near the wall of the camp. Nightheart raced across to them. “I have to go with Squirrelstar,” he meowed. “But I’ll be back soon.”

Both cats looked up at him.

“We’ll be fine,” Waffle assured him, though Wasp blinked uneasily, as if he wasn’t sure at all.

“Take care,” he added.

Nightheart ducked his head and bounded across the camp to meet Squirrelstar beside the thorn tunnel.

Nightheart’s pelt prickled uneasily as he and Squirrelstar headed into the ShadowClan camp, following Yarrowleaf, Hopwhisker, and Lightleap. He couldn’t imagine anything more awkward than being escorted by Sunbeam’s best friend and one of the cats who had tried to eject him from ShadowClan, and really wished that they hadn’t been part of the patrol who had met him and his Clan leader at the border.

Lightleap had barely looked at him the whole time she was padding no more than a tail-length away. Her cool indifference made Nightheart feel even more self-conscious about visiting ShadowClan: Not only had he left, after trying so hard to pass the tasks that Berryheart had made so impossible, but he had taken one of their best warriors with him.

As Nightheart followed Squirrelstar into the center of the camp, Tigerstar emerged from his den and paced forward to meet them, a wary look in his amber eyes. “Squirrelstar.” He gave her a polite nod. “What can I do for you?”

Squirrelstar returned the nod. “I’d like your permission to talk to Frostpaw,” she meowed. “I need to hear her interpretation of the visions she had recently.”

“Of course,” Tigerstar replied, a little to Nightheart’s surprise. “It’s good to know that I’m not the only leader taking this seriously. Lightleap, go and fetch her, please.”

Lightleap bounded off, looking as relieved to be out of Nightheart’s company as he was to see her go.

“How has Frostpaw been settling into her temporary Clan?” Squirrelstar asked while they waited.

“She’s doing well; she’s a fine young medicine cat,” Tigerstar replied. “And this might not be her *temporary* Clan.”

Squirrelstar flicked up her ears in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Frostpaw has visited RiverClan,” Tigerstar explained. “Spied, I mean. And she has brought back some very worrying reports. Splashtail seems to have the whole Clan under his paws, and he’s training his warriors for battle. Frostpaw says he’s very aggressive—he won’t let any cat protest or question him—and he’s firing them up to take revenge on us for the time I placed my warriors into their camp.”

Every muscle in Nightheart’s body tensed at the news. Were ShadowClan and RiverClan going to war with each other—and would the conflict spread to the other Clans around the lake?

“You’re not going to attack him first, are you, Tigerstar?” Squirrelstar asked, putting words to Nightheart’s concern.

The ShadowClan leader shook his head with a resigned sigh. “I know better than to act alone,” he responded. “It might surprise you to hear me say this, but I’d rather not upset the other leaders if I can help it. But that doesn’t mean I’m not worried by what Splashtail is doing. I’ve increased the border patrols, and I’m giving my own warriors more, harder, training. Whether we like it or not—whether we try to avoid it or not—a battle might be coming our way.”

Squirrelstar listened to the ShadowClan leader’s words with anxiety in her green eyes. “I don’t want to see war break out among the Clans,” she mewed.

“Nor do I,” Tigerstar agreed with a determined shake of his head. “The warrior code tells the Clans to help each other.” He hesitated, then went on: “Besides, the timing is terrible for me. I need to unite my own Clan.”

His words reminded Nightheart of how Berryheart had recently tried to depose her leader. She would hardly have tried to do that unless she believed she had some support among her Clanmates. This must be an uncomfortable time for Tigerstar, looking over his shoulder at warriors he should have been able to trust.

“I just wish that RiverClan had a different leader,” Tigerstar went on. “If Frostpaw is right about her visions, Splashtail will stop at nothing to get what he wants.”

“And what does he want?” Squirrelstar asked.

Tigerstar hesitated, his eyes narrowing in thought, as if he was trying to find an answer to Squirrelstar’s question. At length his shoulders slumped and he let out a sigh.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “And that’s the most worrying thing of all. He has the leadership, and yet he obviously isn’t satisfied with that.”

“True.” Squirrelstar nodded agreement. “And it worries me more that the other Clans seem reluctant to stand up to him.”

As Squirrelstar finished speaking, Frostpaw padded over to them, giving Nightheart a quick nod of greeting.

“Tell Squirrelstar about the vision you had at the half-moon meeting,” Tigerstar instructed her.

Frostpaw blinked nervously, but when she launched into her account of the vision, her voice was clear and steady. Nightheart listened, dismayed, as she described how she had found herself standing on the bank of a river, how the sky had darkened and a shadow had fallen over the river, and how the water had poured away into an abyss.

“That would seem to point to a darkness in RiverClan,” Tigerstar murmured when she had finished.

“But what does the disappearing water mean?” Squirrelstar asked. “Surely it can’t mean that RiverClan will disappear!”

Nightheart exchanged a glance with Frostpaw. He guessed that she shared his thought: *Why is this so hard to grasp?* After all, RiverClan had been without a leader since Mistystar’s death, and if Podlight was a fake, they had no medicine cat with a connection to StarClan. And if that was true, wouldn’t that mean they already didn’t exist anymore as a proper Clan?

Maybe the two leaders have known RiverClan for so long that they can’t imagine a world without it.

“StarClan will have their chance to approve him or not soon enough,” Squirrelstar murmured.

Tigerstar turned to Frostpaw. “Tell Squirrelstar what you found out in the RiverClan camp.”

“I went there to spy,” Frostpaw explained, impressing Nightheart with her cool tone. “I learned that Splashtail is putting off getting his

nine lives. He claims they're less important than strengthening his Clan."

"What?" Squirrelstar exclaimed, her ears flicking up in surprise. "Is he mouse-brained?"

"That's what I heard in the RiverClan camp," Frostpaw responded. "Splashtail doesn't seem to think that getting his nine lives is important. I'm afraid he's going to delay and delay until the rest of his Clan just accepts him without StarClan's blessing."

"I find it hard to believe that would happen," Tigerstar grunted. "That would mean a whole Clan turning away from StarClan."

"Such a thing could never happen," Squirrelstar declared firmly. "Surely if Splashtail refuses to go to the Moonpool, RiverClan will reject him."

For a heartbeat there was silence, until Tigerstar shook his head. "We can't be sure what RiverClan will accept," he responded heavily. "They are desperate for a leader so they can be an independent Clan again."

Squirrelstar's green eyes were full of anxiety. "What kind of Clan would they be?" she asked.

Nightheart saw a shudder run through Tigerstar's body. "No cat knows," he growled. "But even if some cat can get Splashtail to go to the Moonpool, I know enough to be sure that RiverClan's troubles aren't over."

"That's true," Squirrelstar agreed. "I'm not even sure what to hope for. If StarClan rejects Splashtail, it might get rid of him, but it makes RiverClan's path forward much harder."

Nightheart knew that it wasn't his place to speak, but he couldn't stop the words tumbling out. "But what if Splashtail lies?" he reminded Squirrelstar of what Ivypool had said. "What if he says that StarClan *did* give him his lives?"

The two Clan leaders looked at each other.

"I wouldn't put it past him," Squirrelstar meowed eventually. "After all, it wouldn't be the first time a Clan leader lied. It happened in your own Clan, Tigerstar."

The ShadowClan leader's fur bristled with indignation. "I suppose you're talking about Nightpelt, back in the old forest," he responded, his lips drawn back in the beginnings of a snarl. "StarClan didn't

grant him nine lives, because that evil mange-pelt Brokenstar was still alive, even though the Clan had exiled him. But Nightpelt lied to *save* his Clan. He was an honorable cat."

"Keep your fur on, Tigerstar," Squirrelstar mewed mildly. "No cat doubts that. But if lying can occur to one cat . . ."

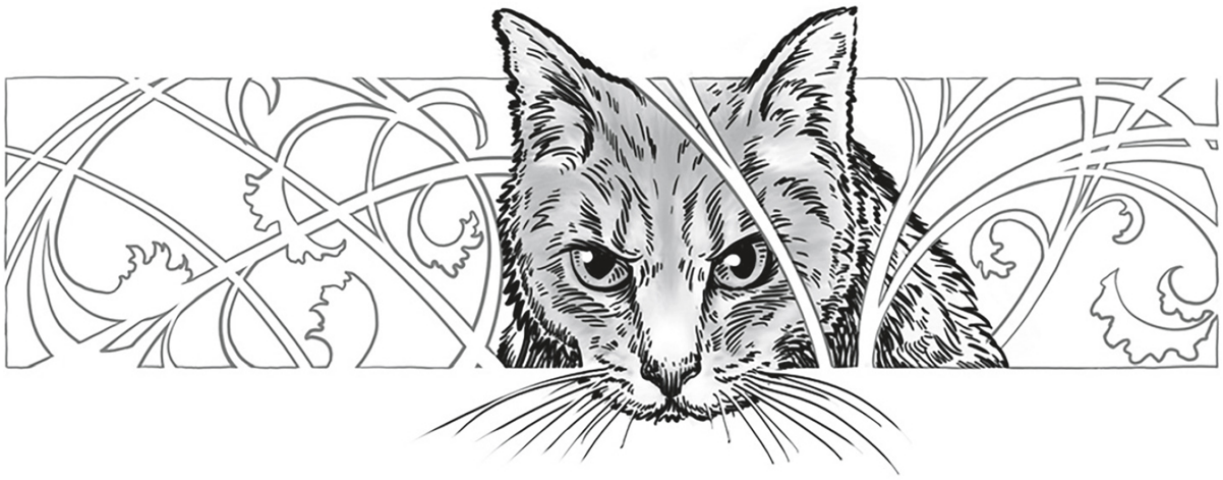
Tigerstar huffed with annoyance but said no more.

"This is how I see it," Squirrelstar began after a moment's silence. "If Splashtail goes to the Moonpool and is rejected by StarClan, he would surely never admit it to his Clanmates. Or he might pretend to go, and tell his Clan that he received his lives, even though he never met with StarClan at all. Or, as Frostpaw says, he will delay for so long that his Clan accepts him anyway. Whatever happens, I can't see a good outcome for RiverClan."

Frostpaw's eyes were brimming with sadness. "You're right, Squirrelstar," she mewed, "but I really wish you weren't."

On the way back to ThunderClan, Nightheart found his heart thrumming with dread, as if he could already see himself lined up for battle, with the hostile warriors of RiverClan facing him. Weariness overwhelmed him from ears to tail-tip, as if he were suddenly enveloped in dark, clinging fog. It took effort for him to put one paw in front of another.

Will the Clans' troubles ever *end?*



Chapter 9

When she had hidden her leaf wrap of stolen herbs among the brambles behind the warriors' den, Sunbeam emerged into the open and found a sunny spot, where she sat washing her paws. At the same time, she let her gaze travel across the camp.

I need some cat to help me. . . .

Her first thought was to ask Nightheart; she knew he would agree. But she didn't see him. Ivypool was crouched beside the fresh-kill pile, sharing prey with Finchlight and Sparkpelt, while Bayshine was pretending to be a badger, growling at Spotfur's kits, who were leaping on his back and then rolling off, waving their paws and tails in the air. Spotfur was watching, her tail curled up in amusement. Wasp and Waffle had their heads together in a patch of sunlight near the camp wall. A patrol of senior warriors was returning, laden with prey. But there was no sign of Nightheart.

Sunbeam was beginning to think that he must have been sent out on patrol when Squirrelstar appeared, bounding down the tumbled rocks, with Nightheart hard on her paws. He halted at the foot of the rocks, then darted off to speak to Wasp and Waffle. Squirrelstar waited for him to return, her tail-tip flicking impatiently. Then both cats headed across the clearing and out of the camp.

I wonder what that's all about, Sunbeam thought. She felt a pang of frustration that once again Nightheart wasn't with her when she needed him. She didn't blame him; he had to obey his Clan leader. *I just wish he were here to support me.*

But Sunbeam didn't have time to worry about what Nightheart was doing. She had problems enough of her own. Giving her paws a last lick, she rose and padded over to the nursery.

By this time Bayshine was lying on his side on the earth floor of the camp, with all three kits jumping up and down on him.

"Hi, Sunbeam!" he panted. "Have you come to rescue me from these fierce warriors?"

"They're fierce indeed," Sunbeam replied, looking over the kits as her whiskers twitched in amusement. "I've hunted with this lot. I wouldn't take them on unless you're ready for a fight!"

Bristlekit looked up at her and lifted a paw, spreading claws. “Grrr!”

“Oh, have mercy on me!” Sunbeam cried, backing up with a chuckle.

“It’s time these fierce warriors had a nap,” Spotfur mewed, rising to her paws. “Come on, kits. I’m sure Bayshine will agree to be a badger another day.”

“Mangy badger!” Graykit gave Bayshine a final swipe. “Get out of our camp!”

“And don’t come back!” Stemkit added.

When Spotfur had herded all three kits into the nursery, Bayshine got up, puffing out his breath and shaking dust out of his pelt. “I’m aching all over!” he exclaimed with a *mrrow* of laughter. “Those kits fight like they’re ready to be apprenticed.” He paused, giving Sunbeam a long look, his head tilted to one side, then added, “Is there something I can do for you?”

I have to do this . . . , Sunbeam told herself firmly. *My family needs me.*

“I stole some herbs from the medicine cats’ den,” she confessed, aware of Bayshine’s whiskers twitching in surprise. “I need them to help my mother, Berryheart. She’s so badly hurt, I’m afraid she’ll die. I want to take them to her, but I don’t think I’ll be allowed to go there again, and I’m bound to be spotted if I try to sneak out of camp by myself.”

“So you want me to help?” Bayshine’s expression was warm and friendly. “No problem, Sunbeam. Go and fetch your herbs, and I’ll tell Ivypool we’re going hunting.”

Sunbeam darted off to where she had hidden the herbs beside the warriors’ den, while Bayshine headed toward the Clan deputy beside the fresh-kill pile.

By the time Sunbeam returned, Bayshine was waiting for her. “Walk close to me,” he instructed her, “so no cat will see what you’re carrying in your jaws. Stay on this side, so Twigbranch won’t notice anything as we’re leaving.”

Sunbeam felt as if every cat were staring at her as she and Bayshine padded across the camp. But no cat called out, and when they passed Twigbranch, who was on watch at the end of the thorn

tunnel, she merely waved her tail at them and said, “I hope the prey runs well!”

The camp entrance was out of sight and the two cats were approaching the edge of ThunderClan territory before Sunbeam felt she could relax.

“Bayshine, this is really kind of you,” she meowed, halting and setting down her leaf wrap of herbs. She still felt a little awkward about accepting his help. “I’m sure I’d never have made it out of camp on my own.”

“No problem,” Bayshine responded. “I’ll get on with hunting now, so we’ll have some prey to take back.”

Sunbeam glanced around. The two cats were standing near the bank of the border stream; she picked up the strong scent of the WindClan markers, but there was nothing to tell her that a patrol was nearby.

“I’ll be off, then,” she murmured, picking up her leaf wrap. “Thanks, Bayshine.”

“May StarClan light your path,” Bayshine responded.

Sunbeam was warmed by the glow of genuine friendship in his eyes.

As she had before, Sunbeam followed the stream on the ThunderClan side until she could leap across into the moorland beyond the WindClan border. Following the border but staying a few tail-lengths outside the territory, she kept all her senses alert for the scent or sound of patrols.

“I hope I’m far enough away that they can’t pick up my scent,” she muttered to herself.

She was relieved when she finally reached the Thunderpath that led to the horseplace and would take her close to where her kin had made their temporary camp. She picked up her pace, not wanting to keep Bayshine waiting, and hoping he wouldn’t be caught and get into trouble.

A roar broke in upon her thoughts, and she turned her head, startled, to see a huge monster bearing down on her. With a terrified screech that spilled her herbs, she tumbled to one side, choking in the acrid smoke that poured out of the monster’s hindquarters.

For a few moments she lay still on the grass verge, remembering what her father had said about the way Berryheart had been injured. She felt as if icy water were trickling through her veins. In her haste she had almost suffered the same fate as her mother—or maybe an even worse one.

Are you a kit? She scolded herself. *Have you forgotten that Thunderpaths are dangerous?*

Sunbeam made herself stop thinking about that; it wouldn't help Berryheart. Forcing herself to her trembling paws, she collected her scattered herbs, hoping that she hadn't gotten them too dirty. Then she headed off to find her kin.

The three cats were hiding in the hollow where Sunbeam had found them before. The scent of Berryheart's infection rose up to meet her, and as Sunbeam drew closer, she could feel the fierce heat wafting off her mother's body.

She's getting worse! Sunbeam choked back a fearful mew. *I know she is!*

Sparrowtail and Hollowspring sprang to their paws to greet Sunbeam; she kept her voice steady as she responded, but it was hard not to flinch at the desperate anxiety she could see in their eyes.

Berryheart was lying on her side, her breath coming in shallow rasps. Her fur was plastered to her body; she was so thin that Sunbeam could see all her bones. Her eyes were staring, vacant, but her nose twitched as Sunbeam approached.

"Sunbeam?" she rasped. Sunbeam was relieved when her mother spoke her name, even when she added a haughty "What are you doing here?" *At least she knows who I am.*

"I've come to check up on you," Sunbeam explained. "And I've brought you some herbs that might help."

Berryheart let out a snort. "Clan herbs? No, thank you. I don't want any help from *any* of the Clans. Not ShadowClan, not ThunderClan, not any of them."

For a moment all four cats fell into silence. Sunbeam's heart ached at her mother's terrible plight, *and* her terrible stubbornness.

“Sparrowtail, do you want to come with me while we find some food for Berryheart?” she asked. She couldn’t keep the exasperation out of her voice as she added, turning her head toward her mother, “Will you at least permit *that*?”

Berryheart gave a dismissive sniff and turned her head away.

Taking that as permission, Sunbeam and Sparrowtail headed out of the hollow side by side. As soon as they were out of earshot, Sunbeam halted and faced her father.

“The herbs will help a bit,” she began. “I brought marigold for the infection, borage leaves for fever, and a few juniper berries for strength.”

“I’ll sneak them into Berryheart’s food, to make sure she takes them,” Sparrowtail promised.

“That’s a good idea,” Sunbeam responded, beginning to feel a little more optimistic. “But these herbs won’t cure her. Berryheart *needs* to see a medicine cat, and soon.”

“You’re right,” Sparrowtail agreed; Sunbeam was surprised by his resolute tone. “We need to do something,” he went on, “and we need to save Berryheart from herself. You know what she’s like, Sunbeam!”

Sunbeam let out a hiss of exasperation. “I certainly do! But however difficult she can be, she’ll still have to see a medicine cat sooner or later.” *I don’t want to think about what will happen if she doesn’t.*

“I know,” her father meowed. “I’ve thought that all along. Hollowspring and I have made a plan. I’ll do my best to convince Berryheart that she *must* seek help from a medicine cat. And if she still won’t hear of it, then you and I and Hollowspring will carry her to ThunderClan for treatment. Can you meet us by the Thunderpath at sunset in three days’ time?”

Sunbeam felt a tight clenching in her chest, remembering Nightheart’s uncertainty about the viability of her bringing her kin to ThunderClan. She worried that her new Clanmates’ wariness of Berryheart might prompt Squirrelstar to reject them and send them away. Then Sunbeam purred, her chest loosening with relief as she remembered who would care for her mother in ThunderClan. Jayfeather and Alderheart would never turn a sick cat away. They

would treat Berryheart and deal with the consequences afterwards. It seemed like the best chance her mother had of staying alive.

By the time she and her father had finished hunting, the sun was going down. Sunbeam turned toward home, feeling more hopeful about her mother than she had since she first saw her injuries. She decided to take the route along the lakeshore; it would be quicker, and she didn't want to travel in the dark, or leave Bayshine waiting for her any longer than she could help.

Every cat will wonder why we've been away all day. We'll both have a few questions to answer!

The quickest way to reach the lakeshore was to cut across a stretch of WindClan territory. Sunbeam knew there might be WindClan patrols about, but as she paused at the border she couldn't see any cat, or scent anything except the border markers.

I'm going to risk it.

As Sunbeam ventured onto the moor, she kept her eyes and ears open for any WindClan cats who might be nearby. She was still too far from the lake to claim she wasn't trespassing, if caught.

The lakeshore was already in sight when Sunbeam picked up the scent of a WindClan patrol. For a heartbeat she froze, pressing herself to the ground, looking around for anywhere she could hide. Already she could hear the cats' voices and feel the vibrations of their paw steps, but a swell of the moorland meant they weren't in sight yet.

Sunbeam spotted an outcrop of boulders a few fox-lengths away; gathering herself, she raced toward it and jumped into a crevice between the rocks, just as the patrol came into view. Holding her breath, she peered out of a crack to see Crowfeather in the lead, with Appleshine and Hootwhisker hard on his paws.

For a brief moment, Sunbeam thought that they would pass her by, like the other patrol she'd encountered the first time she went looking for her kin. But this time she wasn't so lucky.

Crowfeather halted in front of the boulders and opened his jaws to taste the air. He paused for so long that Sunbeam began to hope that he hadn't picked up her scent. But the hope was soon dashed.

"I would say that's a ThunderClan cat, wouldn't you?" Crowfeather murmured to his Clanmates.

In the midst of her danger Sunbeam was pleased to know she must be carrying ThunderClan scent. *I really belong there now.* Then she realized that she might not be a ThunderClan cat for much longer if Squirrelstar found out that she had sneaked away without permission, especially now she had been caught.

Crowfeather took another deep gulp of air. “You are certainly a long way from home, Sunbeam,” he meowed.

His tone was teasing, and for a moment Sunbeam thought that he might let her go, as long as she promised not to hunt on WindClan territory. But when Sunbeam peered out again and met his gaze, she saw that his expression was serious, his blue eyes unrelenting.

I know what has to happen now, she thought despairingly.

Miserable and tense, Sunbeam crept out of her hiding place and padded up to the WindClan patrol. “Greetings, Crowfeather,” she mewed, dipping her head respectfully. “I can explain—”

“I bet she can!” Appleshine interrupted, her yellow tabby fur bristling. “See if you can smell rabbit on her.”

“I haven’t taken prey!” Sunbeam retorted indignantly. “I would never do that.”

To her surprise, Crowfeather didn’t sniff closer to see if he could detect traces of rabbit around her jaws. Instead he turned to Appleshine. “From what I know of Sunbeam, she is an honorable cat, not a prey-stealer.” His tone was cold, and Appleshine, furious at the rebuke, said nothing more, but stood glaring at Sunbeam.

“I assume you’ve been visiting your kin beyond our border,” Crowfeather continued to Sunbeam.

“Yes, Berryheart is injured and I took her some herbs,” Sunbeam responded, eager to explain. “But then it was getting late, and I thought no cat would mind if I took a shortcut across your territory. I’ve barely set paw here at all,” she added hopefully.

“Well, WindClan cats *do* mind,” Crowfeather pointed out. With a nod to his two Clanmates, he added, “You had better finish the patrol, while I take our *guest* back to camp.”

“Oh, please don’t, Crowfeather!” Sunbeam begged, wondering how much worse her troubles could possibly get. “Please just let me go. I’m really sorry, and I promise I’ll never do it again.”

She thought that she could detect a hint of sympathy in the deputy's blue eyes, but he was unmoved by her pleas.

"No, you need to speak to Harestar," he meowed. "Follow me."

The other two cats headed down toward the lake—Appleshine gave Sunbeam a contemptuous flick of her tail as she padded past—while Crowfeather led the way up the hill. Sunbeam trudged along in his paw steps, her head drooping and her tail trailing along the ground. Her belly was churning with apprehension at the thought of facing Harestar—and, even worse, facing Squirrelstar when she was allowed to return to her own territory.

By the time the two cats reached the WindClan camp, the last traces of scarlet had faded from the sky and twilight covered the moor. Before long it would be full dark; Sunbeam realized that there was no hope of returning home before morning.

This just gets worse and worse, she thought miserably. *What will Bayshine think? What will he* say *if any cat asks where I am? Oh, I should never have asked him to help me. I've let him down so badly!*

Crowfeather slid through the bushes that surrounded the top of the hollow where WindClan made its camp, and padded down to the bottom of the slope. Sunbeam followed, acutely aware of cats turning to stare at her.

The camp was dotted with boulders, and here and there clumps of gorse bushes. It looked bleak and unwelcoming to Sunbeam, but she supposed it must suit the moor-dwelling WindClan cats.

Crowfeather disappeared behind one of the boulders, leaving Sunbeam with nothing to do but wait. She shifted awkwardly from paw to paw, wishing that Crowfeather would hurry up.

There was still no sign of him when a young gray tabby she-cat padded up to her, ducked her head, and meowed, "Hi. It's Sunbeam, isn't it?"

Swiftly Sunbeam searched her memory and realized that this was the WindClan medicine-cat apprentice, the cat who had confessed at the Gathering that she had helped the injured Frostpaw to survive and concealed what she had done from her mentor and her Clan.

"That's right," Sunbeam responded. "And you're Whistlepaw."

"Are you in trouble?" Whistlepaw asked. "Can I do anything to help?"

The young cat's friendliness made Sunbeam feel very slightly better; not every WindClan cat was hostile to her. "I am in trouble," she replied. "I trespassed on your territory, and Crowfeather caught me. Thanks for offering to help, but I don't think any cat can save me from my own stupidity."

Whistlepaw didn't seem shocked at her confession. "I expect you had a good reason," she mewed. "But you shouldn't worry about Harestar," she added. "He won't be too tough on you."

"It's Squirrelstar that I'm worried about," Sunbeam responded.

Whistlepaw winced in sympathy. "Well, I'm in trouble too," she declared with an uneasy shrug. "Kestrelflight hasn't forgiven me for not telling any cat about Frostpaw."

"But you did the right thing!" Sunbeam meowed indignantly. "Frostpaw nearly died, and she didn't know which cats she could trust. You *had* to keep her secret, Whistlepaw."

The apprentice's mouth twisted wryly. "Tell that to Kestrelflight."

"I hope your mentor isn't too angry with you."

"No, not now. At first I was afraid he would refuse to have me as his apprentice anymore." Whistlepaw shivered. "That would have been dreadful. But now I'm just confined to camp, so I can't go searching for herbs, or attend Gatherings or half-moon meetings, until Kestrelflight says I can. It's not so bad."

Sunbeam thought it sounded terrible, to be cut off from so much of the work of a medicine cat. How much longer would Kestrelflight go on punishing his apprentice?

"Well, I hope—" she began, only to break off as Crowfeather reappeared, a dark shape in the gathering night.

"Harestar will see you now," he announced brusquely,

As she turned to follow him, Sunbeam nodded goodbye to the young apprentice. "It was nice talking to you, Whistlepaw."

"Good luck with Harestar!" Whistlepaw called after her.

The WindClan leader was sitting in front of the tallest boulder, the white patches on his pelt glimmering in the darkness. He rose to his paws as Sunbeam approached. She halted and faced him, while Crowfeather stood at her shoulder.

"Crowfeather tells me he caught you trespassing," the WindClan leader began. "You know that's against the warrior code, don't you?"

Sunbeam lowered her head in deepest respect. “I know, Harestar,” she mewed humbly. “I’m very sorry about this.”

“Crowfeather says you were visiting your family just beyond our border. Is that true?” Harestar asked.

“Yes, Harestar.”

“And was there any reason why you had to cross our territory, instead of going around by the lake, where you’re allowed to be?”

“No, Harestar.” Sunbeam had to struggle to keep her voice steady as she realized once again how stupid she had been. “Only because I wanted to get home before dark.”

She thought that she caught a gleam of amusement in the WindClan leader’s eyes. “That didn’t work out too well for you,” he commented. “Now you won’t get home until tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, please—” Sunbeam began.

“No, you are definitely not leaving this camp tonight.” Harestar’s voice was firm, cutting off any arguments. “Foxes and badgers will be about, and I’m not risking any of my warriors to escort you. You must stay here.” Again, there was that faint gleam of amusement. “I don’t intend to punish you,” he continued. “I expect Squirrelstar will take care of that herself—and quite efficiently, too.”

You’re right about that, Sunbeam thought. Even if Squirrelstar had indirectly allowed that she might visit her parents, she had been *very* clear that Sunbeam shouldn’t get caught on WindClan territory. And yet here she was.

What will Nightheart think? she asked herself miserably. *He didn’t really want me to do this. And everything was going so well for us. . . .*

“Thank you, Harestar,” she meowed in response to the WindClan leader. “I promise I’ll never trespass again.”

Crowfeather nudged her shoulder. “Come on.” His voice was rough but not unkind. “I’ll find you somewhere to sleep.”

As Sunbeam followed him, misery swept over her again like a choking tide of mud. *I don’t think I’ll sleep at all,* she thought. *I’m too worried about Bayshine, and Squirrelstar. What will I do if she sends me away from ThunderClan? Away from Nightheart?*

Chapter 10

Frostpaw paced restlessly in the ShadowClan medicine cats' den. Moonlight filtered in through the entrance, and she could hear a night bird calling in the forest. Most of the Clan were already sleeping, and Shadowsight was curled up in a ball at the far side of the den.

Am I doing the right thing? she asked herself.

Tonight was the first clear night since the half-moon meeting. That meant it was the night when Splashtail was supposed to get his nine lives. Frostpaw was desperate to go to the Moonpool and see with her own eyes what would happen. She could just sneak off alone, but she had truly had enough of cats questioning her and calling her a liar.

She needed a second witness—a cat whose word would never be doubted. She knew that Shadowsight would go with her willingly, but he had experienced the same confusion about whether his visions were really from StarClan. *He's a good friend to me,* she thought frustratedly, but he wasn't the right cat for this expedition. The very thing that bonded them was the reason he couldn't be the one to back her now.

The sound of approaching paw steps startled Frostpaw out of her thoughts. As she glanced in the direction of the sound, Puddleshine came into the den and halted, blinking in surprise, when he met her gaze. "Still awake, Frostpaw?" he asked.

"I can't sleep." Quickly Frostpaw reminded him why tonight was so important. "Will you come with me to the Moonpool?" she asked. "I need some cat to keep watch to see whether Splashtail even tries to get his lives from StarClan. If he and Podlight don't turn up, or if they come and nothing happens, that will prove that Splashtail isn't a real leader, and Podlight is a fake medicine cat."

Puddleshine remained in silent thought for several heartbeats, his eyes flicking up and down as he considered her request.

"Suppose they lie about what happened," Frostpaw added urgently. "If I go alone, Splashtail will just say I'm confused, like he did before. But you're reliable, Puddleshine. Every cat will believe *you*."

For a moment that seemed to stretch out into seasons, Puddleshine stayed silent. “Yes, I’ll come,” he meowed at last, though Frostpaw could sense his reluctance. “But it might not be as straightforward as you think to tell what happens at the Moonpool, or to prove that a cat does not have a connection to StarClan.”

“But you will come?” Frostpaw begged anxiously.

“I said I will,” Puddleshine responded. “I don’t like sneaking around, but all these arguments about who is telling the truth in RiverClan have gone on too long. We need to get to the bottom of it.”

The two cats set out through the forest and followed the border stream up into the moorland. The sky was clear, with only a few wisps of cloud. The warriors of StarClan glittered overhead, and the moon, swelling to its fullest, shed a bright silver light over the landscape.

Frostpaw was acutely aware of how easily they could be spotted by any other cats heading that way. All her senses were stretched to the limit as she kept a lookout for danger, especially the danger of being spotted by Podlight and Splashtail.

As they followed the stream along a narrow gully, the sides thickly covered with gorse, a rank scent flowed between Frostpaw’s jaws. “Foxes!” she hissed, shuddering. “Let’s get out of here.”

Both cats picked up the pace until they were racing along the gully, where every bush or boulder might hide a den. As the steep sides sank into open moorland, the stream spread out into a boggy area where the waterlogged ground would break their scent if the foxes decided to track them. But Frostpaw couldn’t relax until they reached the crest of a hill and the stink died away behind them.

“Tell me more about what Riverstar told you, and about the vision you had at the meeting,” Puddleshine meowed as they trekked across the seemingly endless moor.

“I’ve told you all I know,” Frostpaw meowed. Hoping that repeating the story of her vision would give her new inspiration about what it meant, she continued: “The shadow that fell over the river, the chasm that opened up, and the way the river water drained away . . .”

She had expected that somehow she would sense an answer, even if she couldn’t put a paw on it right away. She reached out for a

tingle of something like familiarity, an understanding that she would discover if she only kept on thinking about the vision.

But the hoped-for inspiration did not come. Her mind was blank, with no elusive presence to reassure her that she was on the right track. “I can’t think of any meaning that we haven’t already discussed,” she finished.

Puddleshine shook his head in exasperation. “If only StarClan would be a bit clearer . . . But that’s their way.” He stumbled over a stone that poked up through the tough moorland grass, let out an annoyed hiss, then continued once he had recovered his balance. “I don’t want to believe that Splashtail is a fake leader, or that Podlight is a fake medicine cat. I’ve seen enough of what happens when cats take over a Clan by force, or through lies. It will end in bloodshed or worse, if one side has a medicine cat who truly can’t connect to StarClan and receive their guidance but still pretends that he can. That can be more dangerous than no medicine cat at all.”

Guilt pricked Frostpaw’s pads as if she were walking over thistles. *I was that medicine cat for a while,* she thought, and remained silent as she and Puddleshine trekked on.

Shivering in the stiff breeze, Frostpaw slid warily through the bushes and looked down into the hollow of the Moonpool, where the glittering cascade fell into the pool, breaking the moon’s reflection into innumerable flashes of light. Splashtail and Podlight were nowhere to be seen.

“They’re not here yet,” Frostpaw murmured to Puddleshine as he slipped through the barrier to her side. “Let’s go down and find somewhere to hide.”

As she descended the spiral path, Frostpaw wondered whether Splashtail and Podlight could have been here already and gone away with the ceremony completed. But when she crept stealthily around the edge of the pool, giving the stones a good sniff, she couldn’t pick up any cat-scent, except for a few stale traces from the last half-moon meeting.

“It’s okay,” she reported to Puddleshine. “They haven’t been here.”

The senior medicine cat waved his tail, beckoning her over to where a hazel bush was rooted beside the rock face near the waterfall. “This will be a good place to hide,” he mewed, “but we’d better do something to disguise our scent first.”

Both he and Frostpaw rolled themselves in a clump of thyme, then slid through the hazel branches to settle down in the narrow space between the bush and the cliff. They were sheltered from the wind, though Frostpaw fidgeted uncomfortably as now and again spray from the cascade drizzled over her.

But I’d put up with a lot more than this if it meant getting proof of the truth about Splashtail!

“I think we should stay until the moon has set,” Puddleshine murmured to Frostpaw. “After all, it’s possible Splashtail might just not come. Why would he, if he knows he won’t actually get his lives from StarClan?”

Frostpaw nodded. “If we stay for the whole night, we can prove that he never came here, even if he lies and says he did. Let him try to explain that away!”

She felt tension swelling inside her as she crouched, peering through the branches, but she didn’t have very long to wait before she spotted movement in the bushes at the top of the hollow, and Splashtail appeared, closely followed by Podlight.

“They’re here,” she whispered.

“Shhh!” Puddleshine responded.

Frostpaw swallowed and tried to breathe silently as she watched the two RiverClan cats approach the Moonpool. Splashtail was in the lead, padding downward with his head and tail both held high, looking very much like a Clan leader who really was going to commune with StarClan. Podlight seemed a little less sure of himself, his glance darting here and there, but both cats were walking purposefully. They reached the bottom of the path and settled down, uncomfortably close to the bush where Frostpaw and Puddleshine were hiding.

Podlight let out a huff of amusement. “Your new siblings are coming at just the right time,” he remarked.

For a heartbeat Frostpaw wondered what he was meowing about, until she realized that with a litter of kits on their way,

Mothwing would have to stay in the nursery. She wouldn't be able to accompany Splashtail and Podlight to see what they were up to.

Lucky for Splashtail, she thought.

"Yes, and now we're free to do this on our own." Splashtail confirmed her thought with a satisfied purr.

He glanced around the hollow carefully, and Frostpaw shrank closer to the rock face, terrified that he would spot her. But after a long scrutiny, he turned to Podlight.

"Did you see any sign we were being followed?" he asked. "Duskfur and Icewing seemed so suspicious of our plan to come here," he added bitterly. "I wouldn't put it past them to make sure we really did."

"Yeah," Podlight agreed. "If it weren't for them, we could have hung out somewhere comfortable and shared a vole or two, instead of trekking all the way up here."

"Then have you seen them?" Splashtail asked.

The gray-and-white tom shook his head. "No, not since we left RiverClan territory."

"Good," Splashtail purred, stretching out his legs and then relaxing. "How long do you think we should stick around?"

Podlight let out a nervous *mrrow*. "How should I know?" he responded. "Long enough that it looks good."

Frostpaw stifled an intake of breath, and shot a meaningful glance at Puddleshine. This was the proof that she was right. The two cats had no intention of talking to StarClan. *Podlight doesn't even know how!* They were just going to sit here so that their Clanmates would believe they had stayed long enough for Splashtail to have received his nine lives.

Puddleshine gave a grim nod and touched his tail lightly to Frostpaw's jaws, signaling her to stay silent.

The two RiverClan cats were still deep in conversation.

"It'll be a relief when this is over," Podlight sighed. "You'll be Splashstar, and RiverClan will be safe from Tigerstar's interference for good."

"Yes . . ." Splashtail sounded less certain. "Well, I hope so. We know we can never trust ShadowClan. Especially now that that wretched Frostpaw is there, sowing doubt into Tigerstar's heart.

They're bullies, every last cat of them, and they'll take any excuse to invade us again. And next time they won't leave."

Puddleshine frowned at the brown tabby tom's words, his whiskers twitching briefly in annoyance, though he said nothing.

Podlight rose to his paws and took a long look around the hollow, at the Moonpool and the waterfall, then raised his head to gaze at the stars. The shifting reflections in the water cast prickles of silver light over his gray-and-white pelt. "Well, nothing is happening," he mewed. "I wish I knew what was *supposed* to happen."

Splashtail shrugged. "No cat knows, except for leaders and medicine cats," he responded. "They're not allowed to reveal what happens at the ceremony. And that's all to the good," he went on, "because that means we don't have to make up a story." He let out a contemptuous snort. "I imagine they must meet some StarClan cats, or what's the point of coming here?"

"Maybe Mistystar, or even Leopardstar, might come," Podlight suggested, sounding nervous again. Frostpaw guessed he really believed that StarClan cats might actually appear, and was worried about what would happen if they did. "Frostpaw says she saw Riverstar," he finished.

"Fox dung to what Frostpaw says." Splashtail sounded suddenly furious, his fur beginning to bristle. "We don't let Frostpaw control us, right?"

"No, of course we don't." Podlight settled down on the ground again, a tail-length from his leader. "Sorry, Splashtail."

The young tom let his shoulder fur lie flat. "What a joke it would be if we saw Reedwhisker," he sniggered. "I could kill him all over again!"

I'd like to see you try! Frostpaw had to dig her claws hard into the ground to stop herself from springing out of hiding to confront the false leader. *You murdered Reedwhisker. You wouldn't dare face him in a fair fight.*

"Maybe that's what you have to do," Podlight suggested. "Fight nine StarClan warriors so they each give you a life."

For a moment Splashtail looked disconcerted, as if this idea frightened him. Then he let out a contemptuous snort. "Never! Do

you think weaklings like Leafstar or that rabbit-chasing Harestar could defeat *nine* warriors? No, it has to be easier than that."

"Hunting, then—hunting nine mice," Podlight suggested.

"Oh, I'd be up for that." Splashtail swiped his tongue around his jaws. "I'm so hungry after traipsing all the way up here, I could eat nine mice, no problem."

Frostpaw glanced at Puddleshine and saw her own fury reflected in the ShadowClan cat's expression. *He's seeing what I'm seeing. Finally I have another witness!*

She had never seen a nine-lives ceremony—she knew no more about it than Podlight and Splashtail did—but she was sure it wouldn't be anything like the stupid ideas they were suggesting.

How dare you mock our warrior ancestors!

"Anyway, there's no point in discussing which cats might appear," Splashtail continued, "because none of them will. And that's a good thing, because I'm not going to have a load of dead cats telling me what to do. I wouldn't listen to them, even if they did show up."

Podlight nodded agreement, but Frostpaw wondered once again whether he was as confident as he was trying to appear. It took courage to reject StarClan in this, their special place—and she guessed Podlight did not have that courage.

"I know you don't think they will come now," he meowed to Splashtail, "but what happens if one day StarClan does decide to pick a real—I mean, a *different* leader?"

Splashtail gave a contemptuous sniff, waving his tail as if he were brushing aside his Clanmate's concerns. "Then we'll find a way to step aside without getting into trouble for lying. If worse comes to the worst, we'll plead that we're so devoted to RiverClan that we only wanted to give it some stability until StarClan guided us to the real leader. That's barely a mouse whisker away from the truth. And after that . . . well, there'd be plenty of time to try again."

"I hope you're right," Podlight muttered uncomfortably.

"Of course I'm right," Splashtail responded.

Frostpaw could hear absolute conviction in Splashtail's voice. She wondered whether he truly believed that his instincts were right, and that everything he did was for the good of his Clan.

How can any cat deceive himself so badly?

“And I just can’t believe that StarClan would have the power or the will to pick another cat,” Splashtail continued. “Not when I already control the Clan. After all, they can’t care that much for RiverClan’s fate if Riverstar chose to put it in *Frostpaw’s* claws.”

Both Splashtail and Podlight collapsed into loud *mrrow*s of laughter, their tails curling up as if Splashtail had just said the funniest thing ever.

Once more anger thrilled through all Frostpaw’s body, so strongly that she almost lost control and growled at Splashtail. But before she could let out the sound, she caught her breath instead, as a cat appeared, reflected in the surface of the Moonpool and glittering as if he were made of stars.

“Riverstar!” she breathed out.

The ancient leader waded out of the water and leaped right over the two impostors, stars streaming through his fur and swirling around his ears. He landed between them and the bush where Frostpaw and Puddleshine were hiding, and swished his tail, gazing at Frostpaw with warm approval in his eyes.

Under that wise gaze, Frostpaw drew a deep breath and let calm flow through her. Glancing at Puddleshine, she saw that the senior medicine cat was staring at her, his eyes wide and his jaws gaping. *He can see Riverstar, too!* They both turned back to Riverstar as his starry shape faded to a faint glimmer, and then was gone.

Without a word spoken, Frostpaw saw the doubt vanish from Puddleshine’s gaze. Now she was certain that he believed she was telling the truth, that she really did have a connection to StarClan.

Even more important, neither Splashtail nor Podlight had reacted to Riverstar at all, not even when he’d skimmed over their heads, his paws no more than a mouse-length away. It was clear now, without question, that Podlight was no medicine cat.

Clear without question that Splashtail was not the true leader of RiverClan.

By the time she and Puddleshine returned to the ShadowClan camp, Frostpaw felt so weary she thought that her paws would drop off. Puddleshine, however, seemed as energetic as if he had just awoken from a long, refreshing sleep.

“Come on,” he meowed. “We have to tell Tigerstar about this.”

“But it’s still the middle of the night . . . ,” Frostpaw protested, gazing up at a sky that showed not the faintest trace of dawn.

Puddleshine took no notice, simply striding across the camp to the Clan leader’s den. Frostpaw trailed after him, apprehensive about what Tigerstar’s reaction would be when he was dragged out of his warm nest.

Halting outside the den, Puddleshine let out a loud yowl. “Tigerstar! Tigerstar!”

An incoherent rumble came from inside the den.

“Tigerstar!” the senior medicine cat repeated. “Come out! This can’t wait.”

A few heartbeats later Tigerstar appeared in the entrance to the den. His eyes were sleepy and his fur was clumped, with scraps of debris from his nest clinging to it.

“This had better be good,” he growled, a massive yawn following his words.

“Oh, it is, Tigerstar, we promise.” Puddleshine took a deep breath. “We’ve witnessed something important tonight. We have to share it with you *now*. . . .”

Chapter 11

Nightheart was unable to revel in the early morning sun as he made his way along the ThunderClan border. The sunlight might have dappled the ground, but his worries so darkened his mind that he might as well have been walking through shadows.

Waffle was padding beside him; Nightheart had persuaded Squirrelstar to let them do the dawn patrol together. He wanted to give the park cat another taste of warrior life, because he could tell that the tom was beginning to feel at home in ThunderClan. He was relaxed, sleeping more soundly, and enthusiastic about the warrior duties he was able to share. He took every chance he could to visit the elders and listen to their stories of past ThunderClan triumphs.

Nightheart was disappointed, however, that Wasp wasn't showing the same enthusiasm. He didn't go to listen to the stories, and though he helped sometimes with duties in camp, he didn't seem interested in learning about life in ThunderClan. More than once Nightheart had caught him gazing out across the forest in the direction of RiverClan.

Now Nightheart halted beside a gnarled oak stump, where new, whippy twigs were poking up from the ancient roots. "We set a marker here," he told Waffle. "Do you want to do it? I've shown you how, and you've been staying in our camp so long that you're carrying our scent."

Waffle's ears perked up. "Sure, Nightheart!"

While he was leaving his scent among the oak roots, Nightheart stood with his head raised, tasting the air but unable to make out the one scent he was searching for. He was unaware that Waffle had finished setting the marker until he padded up and nudged him in the side.

"Nightheart, what's the matter?" Waffle asked. "You've been depressed all morning. It isn't like you."

Nightheart hesitated, wondering how far he could trust the park cat. "Okay, Waffle," he meowed at last. "I'll tell you—but for StarClan's sake, don't let Squirrelstar or Ivypool know. Sunbeam is missing."

Waffle stared at him, surprise and anxiety in his face. “Oh, no!” he exclaimed. “I’m so sorry.”

“She went out yesterday to bring herbs to her kin,” Nightheart explained, “and she didn’t come home last night. Bayshine covered for her this morning, saying that she came back late and went hunting before dawn. According to him, every cat missed her because they were asleep. I want to search for her *right now*, but I know I can’t, not yet. . . .”

Waffle brushed his tail along Nightheart’s side. “It seems very complicated, being a warrior,” he murmured sympathetically. “I love it, but no cat in the park ever told us where we could and couldn’t go.”

Nightheart tilted his head to one side. “That’s not entirely true,” he pointed out. “You had to keep an eye out for dangers—like dogs, monsters, and Twolegs. And you still had your own territory to protect.”

Waffle paused for a moment, blinking thoughtfully, then nodded. “I suppose you’re right.”

Nightheart set out again, leading the way along the ThunderClan border, freshening the scent markers until they reached the stream that marked the boundary with WindClan. “We’re almost done,” he declared. “Once we follow the stream down to the lake, our patrol is finished, and we can go back to camp.”

“Maybe Sunbeam will have turned up by the time we return,” Waffle suggested.

A tiny spurt of hope sprang up inside Nightheart. “Maybe,” he mewed, “and if she hasn’t, then I think I’ll ask Squirrelstar for permission to go and look for her.”

But before Nightheart and Waffle had moved more than a few fox-lengths downstream, a voice called out, “Nightheart!”

Nightheart turned to see Crowfeather calling to him from the opposite bank, with Hootwhisker standing at his shoulder.

“Greetings,” the WindClan deputy continued, with a polite dip of his head. “May we come across and visit your camp? We want to return something that got lost on our territory.”

“Something that . . . ?” Nightheart gasped as Crowfeather stood aside, revealing Sunbeam standing behind the two WindClan cats.

Her head was hanging in shame; she gave Nightheart a single swift glance, then went back to studying her paws.

A gust of relief that his mate was unhurt shook Nightheart like a blast of wind, but at the same time every hair on his pelt grew hot with embarrassment. *Sunbeam, we really don't need this right now!* For a moment he could only stare. Then, pulling himself together, he managed to choke out, "Of course. Come across."

With Sunbeam and the WindClan warriors following, and Waffle bringing up the rear, Nightheart led the way across ThunderClan territory to the stone hollow. Each paw step felt more awkward than the last. He had nothing to say to the WindClan warriors, and he couldn't speak to Sunbeam while they were listening. Waffle tactfully didn't try to talk.

When Nightheart thrust his way through the thorn tunnel, he spotted Squirrelstar talking to Ivypool beside the fresh-kill pile. She raised her head, stiffening as she recognized the newcomers, then stalked across to meet them in the center of the camp.

"Crowfeather. Greetings." Squirrelstar's voice was cool. "What's going on?"

Crowfeather gave Squirrelstar a respectful nod. "We caught this warrior of yours trespassing on WindClan territory," he replied, flicking his tail at Sunbeam. "There was no harm done, or prey taken," he continued; Nightheart thought that his tone was rather understanding for the usually cranky, difficult Crowfeather. "She was alone, and I know that some things can seem more important than Clan boundaries."

Nightheart suspected that Crowfeather knew about Sunbeam's family and where they had made their makeshift camp, and he was at least partly sympathetic to her need to help them.

"However, we in WindClan must defend our borders," Crowfeather went on, his voice growing firmer. "Surely you agree with that, Squirrelstar."

"Of course I agree with that," Squirrelstar responded, fixing her green gaze on Sunbeam, who flinched, blinking worriedly. "I'm sorry for what my wayward warrior has done, and she will be punished, I promise you."

Nightheart hoped that his Clan leader wouldn't be too harsh on his mate. After all Squirrelstar had sort of given her permission to go —if Sunbeam had correctly understood what she meant. To his relief, it seemed to him that every cat was doing their best to be kind, considering the strain Sunbeam was suffering, but no cat could admit to it.

"Then there's no more to be said," Crowfeather meowed, dipping his head respectfully. "May StarClan light your path, Squirrelstar."

"And yours, Crowfeather," Squirrelstar responded.

When Crowfeather and Hootwhisker were gone, Squirrelstar beckoned Sunbeam closer to her. "Find Bayshine for me," she ordered Nightheart.

That didn't take long. Bayshine was standing among a small group of ThunderClan warriors who were clustered together a few tail-lengths away, listening with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. Nightheart called his name and beckoned him over with a wave of his tail. Bayshine padded up, his expression nervous as he halted beside Sunbeam.

Squirrelstar directed a hard stare at the two young warriors. "I want to know exactly what went on last night," she began. "And I *don't* want to hear any lies or excuses. Sunbeam, I—"

She broke off at the sound of shocked exclamations from the cats standing around in the clearing. Nightheart turned to see that Lilyheart had appeared from the thorn tunnel, and treading hard on her paws was Tigerstar.

The ShadowClan leader bounded rapidly across the camp and faced Squirrelstar. "I need to speak to you urgently," he meowed, not even waiting to greet her.

Squirrelstar flicked her tail-tip in irritation. "Can't it wait?" she asked. "I'm dealing with a Clan matter right now."

Nightheart suspected that she didn't want to scold Sunbeam in front of Tigerstar, especially when Sunbeam had once been his warrior. It would be so embarrassing for the Clan leader to suggest that things weren't going well for Sunbeam in her new Clan.

"No, I'm afraid that it *can't* wait," Tigerstar replied determinedly. "I've already been kicked out of SkyClan this morning. I just hope *you* will have a more open mind than Leafstar, and listen to me."

Squirrelstar let out a long sigh. “We’ll talk later,” she told Sunbeam and Bayshine, dismissing them with a wave of her tail. “Now, Tigerstar,” she continued when the younger warriors had withdrawn, “I’m guessing that I should have my medicine cats with me for this meeting—and maybe Nightheart?”

“Any of them would be welcome,” Tigerstar meowed.

“Nightheart, fetch the medicine cats, please,” Squirrelstar ordered. “We’ll be over here, at the edge of camp.” She led Tigerstar toward a niche in the rock wall, near the warriors’ den, that was partly sheltered by bushes.

Before he headed to find Jayfeather and Alderheart, Nightheart turned to Waffle, who had stood listening to all this with wide, dismayed eyes. “This must be about Frostpaw,” he whispered to him. “Please, can you go to Sunbeam and tell her that I want to be with her, but I have to obey Squirrelstar?”

Waffle nodded and hurried off to where Sunbeam and Bayshine had joined their Clanmates, while Nightheart made his way to the medicine cats’ den.

Tigerstar wouldn’t show up unannounced unless it was something serious, he thought worriedly.

“Come in,” Squirrelstar mumbled as Nightheart arrived beside the rock wall with Alderheart and Jayfeather. While the three cats were settling into the niche, she added, “Okay, Tigerstar, spit it out.”

“Frostpaw and Puddleshine went to the Moonpool last night,” the ShadowClan leader began. “Splashtail and Podlight were there. . . .”

Nightheart listened, appalled, to the story Tigerstar had to tell. Even though he’d known that Splashtail and Podlight were both fakers, it was shocking to hear how they had mocked StarClan and the nine-lives ceremony.

“This means that Splash*star* is no true leader,” Tigerstar finished. “And what’s more, he never cared about StarClan, nor did he intend to even try to receive his nine lives.”

“You say Riverstar appeared to Puddleshine and Frostpaw?” Alderheart’s tone was full of wonder.

“He did,” Tigerstar meowed. “Whereas Splashtail and Podlight had no idea he was even there. That must mean that StarClan

believes it's time for the other Clans to intervene and stop RiverClan from going down this dangerous path."

Squirrelstar's green eyes held a doubtful look. "I was agreeing with you right up until you said we should intervene," she murmured. "I don't like this any more than you do, Tigerstar, but taking over RiverClan last time didn't work out for you—or for them. In fact, it might have made all of this worse. No other leader has come forward. StarClan hasn't told Frostpaw who *should* be leader, have they?"

Tigerstar's shoulder fur began to bristle in anger. "Duskfur was doing fine as temporary leader," he muttered. "And *she* never falsely claimed to have been chosen by StarClan."

"Do you *really* want to spill blood over this?" Squirrelstar asked. Nightheart guessed from her hissing breath that his leader was trying to bite back exasperation. "ShadowClan's as well as RiverClan's? I know it's not an easy decision to make, but if Splashtail's ambition is just to rule over RiverClan, shouldn't we let RiverClan decide if that's what they want? After all, Nightstar led ShadowClan for some time without his nine lives. Besides, we've *just* added new rules into the warrior code for deposing a leader, and those rules say that the process has to begin inside the Clan—as you know very well, Tigerstar. RiverClan can oust the so-called Splashstar. I'm not sure the other Clans can or should."

Nightheart swallowed nervously. "I went with Frostpaw on her mission to discover the truth," he mewed. He forced himself not to flinch as all heads turned toward him. "We learned that Splashtail tried to kill her—he almost *did* kill her—and he truly did kill Reedwhisker and set the dogs on Curlfeather." Nightheart hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should be lecturing two Clan leaders like this, and then went on. "I don't think Splashtail's ambitions do end in RiverClan. Frostpaw says that Riverstar, and all of StarClan, wants her to stop Splashtail becoming leader, and I believe her. I don't know exactly *what* Splashtail wants, but I think he might stop at nothing to get it."

"But can we really spill blood over it?" Squirrelstar asked again. "*Before* he has had a chance to do anything that affects the other Clans?"

“Can we afford not to?” Jayfeather asked. “Don’t forget that mange-pelt Ashfur, and all the cats who were hurt or killed because of him. A truly evil leader can do the kind of harm to the Clans that can’t be healed for season upon season. And I’m sure that the two park cats lurking in the bushes behind us would say the same.”

“What?” Squirrelstar half rose, while Alderheart dived into the bushes and reappeared, thrusting Wasp and Waffle in front of him. “What do you think you are doing?” the Clan leader challenged them.

The park cats exchanged an embarrassed glance, then faced Squirrelstar without flinching.

“We heard this was about Frostpaw,” Waffle explained. “I don’t know everything that’s going on here, but we do know that Frostpaw is a true friend, and not a liar.”

“She spoke to the great Riverstar,” Wasp added, awe in his voice. “Riverstar himself is asking, through her, for your help to save RiverClan. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

Squirrelstar was silent for a long moment, her green gaze thoughtful. “If Leafstar has refused to listen to any of this,” she muttered at last, turning back to Tigerstar, “that makes things much harder. If you can at least persuade WindClan, then we can confront Splashtail. We can try to expose him to RiverClan, and then see what RiverClan decides. But one thing is certain.” She brought one forepaw down hard on the earth of the camp floor. “I don’t want to risk any ThunderClan or ShadowClan lives over this unless there’s no alternative. Besides, if SkyClan turned you away, then maybe Splashtail has convinced them to be on his side. In which case we will need WindClan, to be sure we have the greater strength.”

Tigerstar didn’t disagree with any of that. “Then I’ll be on my way to WindClan,” he meowed. He rose, and with a nod of farewell headed out across the camp.

Squirrelstar waved her tail at Wasp and Waffle. “You can go,” she snapped. “But don’t let me catch you sneaking around again.”

“We won’t,” Waffle responded. “We’re sorry, Squirrelstar.”

They retreated; Jayfeather and Alderheart rose to follow them, but Alderheart hesitated, then turned back to face Squirrelstar.

“What will happen if WindClan joins us and ShadowClan to confront RiverClan, and they decide to depose Splashtail?” he

asked. “And what will happen if they keep him?”

Squirrelstar shook her head slowly. “I don’t know the answer to that,” she sighed. “I don’t think any cat knows.”

Alderheart nodded sadly, and the two medicine cats headed for their own den.

“Oh, and Nightheart,” Squirrelstar mewed as he was about to leave, “go bring Sunbeam to me.”

Chapter 12

Sunbeam waited awkwardly beside the fresh-kill pile, watching the discussion with Tigerstar but too far away to hear what the Clan leaders were saying to each other. Her belly churned with nervousness. *What will Squirrelstar do to me?* she wondered. *What if she sends me back to ShadowClan? Would ShadowClan even want me if I returned in disgrace?* She tried to swallow a lump in her throat, as if a piece of crow-food were stuck there. *If I have to leave ThunderClan, I'll lose Nightheart, and I don't think I could bear it.*

Eventually Tigerstar left and the group broke up; Nightheart padded over to Sunbeam. "Squirrelstar wants to speak with you," he announced.

Sunbeam let out a sigh of relief. "Thank StarClan! Now I can get it over with."

"Did you see your family?" Nightheart asked her as they headed back to the niche where Squirrelstar was waiting. "How are they coping without a Clan?"

"Berryheart is getting worse," Sunbeam replied, trying not to give way to her anxiety. "She didn't want to take the herbs I brought her, because she said they were Clan herbs, and she wants nothing to do with the Clans. Sparrowtail said he would sneak them into her food."

"Will that be enough?" Nightheart asked.

"I don't think so," Sunbeam sighed. "But Sparrowtail and I made a plan: I'm to meet him by the small Thunderpath in three days' time, and if Berryheart is no better, he and I and Hollowspring will bring her here to Jayfeather and Alderheart."

"That could work." Nightheart looked away, frowning, for a moment. Sunbeam knew he was thinking about all the difficult conversations that would be had in ThunderClan if she brought her kin into camp for medicine cat attention. Then Nightheart gave her a comforting nuzzle, saying nothing—silently telling her to do whatever she felt was right.

When they reached Squirrelstar, who was waiting just outside the niche, the Clan leader was swishing her tail in annoyance. She

dismissed Nightheart with a jerk of her head.

“Sunbeam,” she began in a low growl once he had gone, “did I or did I not make it very clear that you were *not* to get caught on WindClan territory?”

Sunbeam scuffled the ground with her forepaws. “You did make that very clear, Squirrelstar.”

“I have sympathy for what you’re going through, and I understand all this is very difficult for you.” Squirrelstar sounded weary, as if she had enough problems without having to deal with a disobedient warrior. Her tone was grim but controlled. “But you will still have to be punished. I can’t be seen to go easy on you. We’re both new: you as a ThunderClan warrior, and me as their Clan leader. All eyes are on both of us right now.”

“I understand, Squirrelstar,” Sunbeam responded, feeling worse than if her leader had snarled at her.

“When I tell you to do something,” Squirrelstar continued, “even if that something is ‘Don’t get caught,’ you need to take that order seriously. It’s not too late for you to leave ThunderClan, but if you want to stay, then you must do as you’re told.”

Sunbeam felt her belly shaking with relief that at least she wasn’t to be driven out of the Clan right now. “I understand,” she repeated meekly. “I’m very sorry, and I’m really certain that I want to stay.”

Squirrelstar gazed at her for a moment, then took a deep breath. “How is your family?” she asked in a much softer tone.

“Not good,” Sunbeam replied. Her worry for her family made it hard to get the words out, her voice sounding meek and quiet. “Berryheart was hurt by some Twoleg stuff, and the wound is infected.” She felt an impulse to tell Squirrelstar the plan she had made with Sparrowtail, but stopped herself. She would wait until she had spoken to her father, and find out whether he had convinced Berryheart to ask Tigerstar and Puddleshine for help.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Squirrelstar responded, then gave her pelt a shake. “So, Sunbeam,” she continued, “from now on, you will take on apprentice duties, and you’re confined to camp until I say you can leave. Now go and send Bayshine to me.”

Sunbeam dipped her head submissively and turned away. She knew she deserved her punishment, but it felt like a heavy weight on

her shoulders. And shock pulsed through her when she realized what the punishment might mean.

I'll still be stuck in camp in three days, unless Squirrelstar releases me first. What if I can't meet my father after all?

After she returned from her second patrol of the day, Sunbeam passed by the medicine cats' den. Alderheart was busy in the herb store, sorting out the withered stems that weren't worth keeping.

"You're doing very well," he told Sunbeam, his voice warm and encouraging. "I'm sure it won't be long before you're back on warrior duties."

The only response Sunbeam could make was a sigh. This was the third day of her punishment, the day she was supposed to meet her father by the Thunderpath. Instead, her next task was to remove ticks from the elders.

Leaving the medicine cats' den, Sunbeam gazed up at the sky. Sunhigh had already passed; anguish was gripping her like a claw that tightened with every passing heartbeat.

What will Sparrowtail think if I'm not there? she asked herself. *Will he think that I don't care about my kin anymore?*

Sunbeam wondered whether she should go to Squirrelstar now, confess the plan, and ask for permission to go. Or could she sneak out? Glancing around, she saw that no cat was looking her way, but she rejected the plan before she had taken a single paw step toward the dirtplace tunnel. She couldn't do that. She took her pledge to Squirrelstar seriously; she wanted to be a loyal and obedient ThunderClan cat.

Spotting Nightheart returning from a hunting patrol she padded across the camp to join him. "I need to talk to you," she mewed.

Nightheart gave her a nod, then bounded over to the fresh-kill pile to drop the two mice and the vole he was carrying. Sunbeam followed him.

"I hoped Squirrelstar would have ended my punishment by now," Sunbeam began, drawing Nightheart aside and speaking softly. "But she hasn't. And this is the day my father will expect to meet with me." She hesitated, then added, "Could you go instead? Just as far

as the Thunderpath, to check whether Berryheart is still . . .” Her voice caught for a moment as she forced the words out. “Still alive?”

She felt the claw of anguish grow tighter still as she saw the indecision in her mate’s eyes. “There’s so much going on right now,” he sighed. “I’m wary of getting caught on WindClan territory. Squirrelstar told me that Tigerstar has spoken to Harestar, but that Harestar insisted on thinking things over. He won’t make a pledge to support either side until the Gathering.”

“That’s still a few nights away,” Sunbeam mewed, her anxiety beginning to rise.

Nightheart nodded. “Harestar thinks that if Splashtail truly isn’t chosen by StarClan, his leadership might start to unravel in RiverClan before then.”

“That’s awfully optimistic,” Sunbeam responded, wondering what this had to do with visiting her family.

“I know.” Nightheart touched her shoulder with his tail. “But I don’t want to do anything that will affect Harestar’s thinking. If I annoy him, then he might not want to cooperate with ThunderClan.”

Sunbeam ducked her head. She knew that Nightheart was right, but she could hardly bear the wave of disappointment that surged through her.

Nightheart pressed himself to her side. “I’m not refusing to go. Of course I will,” he promised her. “I’ll go around the lake in the other direction. No cat will bother me if I stay within three tail-lengths of the water.”

Sunbeam felt as though the sun had come out from behind a cloud. “Thank you, Nightheart!” she whispered. “If you do that, WindClan can’t possibly be angry with you.”

“I’d do anything for you,” he assured her. “But I don’t expect Berryheart will be pleased to see me, or trust me to help her.”

“I don’t even know if my mother is still alive.” Sunbeam’s voice shook more than she expected.

Nightheart pressed his nose comfortingly into her shoulder fur. “If I can help Berryheart, I will.”

“Thank you!” Sunbeam breathed out. Her heart seemed to be trying to escape through her throat as she watched him race across the camp and disappear into the thorn tunnel.

While Nightheart was away, Sunbeam tried her best to keep busy. She took prey to the elders and the nursery, and played moss-ball with Spotfur's kits so that their mother could have a much-needed nap.

The sun was going down, casting shadows into the stone hollow, when Jayfeather called her over. He was standing outside his den, beside a huge bundle of freshly picked herbs.

"There's tansy, chervil, and borage here," he told her. "Sort them into three separate piles."

Sunbeam wasn't sure she knew which herbs were which, and figured her best bet was to heap similar-looking and -smelling leaves together. But her heart was with Nightheart on his journey around the lake, and with every passing heartbeat, as the shadows stretched farther across the camp, she found it harder to keep her mind on her task.

Finally Jayfeather padded up and sniffed at her heaps, then drew back with a hiss, glaring at Sunbeam from blind blue eyes. "For StarClan's sake!" he snapped. "Can't you tell one leaf from another? Go away, and don't come back until you can concentrate!"

"Sorry, Jayfeather," Sunbeam muttered, and fled into the center of the camp.

Ashamed of herself for making a mess of such a simple task, she was trying to recover herself when she spotted Nightheart emerging from the thorn tunnel. He was alone, his head and tail drooping as if he was exhausted.

Sunbeam raced across the camp to meet him. "What happened?" she asked.

Nightheart met her gaze; Sunbeam's heart lurched when she saw the sadness in his eyes. "Is Berryheart—" She couldn't go on.

"As far as I know, your mother is still alive," Nightheart meowed, resting his tail-tip on her shoulder to calm her. "When I got to the Thunderpath," he continued, "no cat was there. I waited for a while, but there was no sight or sound of any cat. At one point, I did think I heard a scuffle coming from the undergrowth. I could scent cats, but not a scent I recognized."

"I guess they must have lost their ShadowClan scent by now," Sunbeam mewed sadly.

“Anyway, no cat showed up,” Nightheart continued, his tone growing regretful. “I suspect Berryheart and the others turned around when they saw it was me.” He gave her ear a lick. “I’m very sorry, Sunbeam.”

“It’s not your fault,” Sunbeam reassured him, pressing her nose into his shoulder fur. “Sparrowtail wouldn’t have turned away just because it was you there, not me. Not if they really needed help.”

“And Berryheart?” Nightheart pressed.

Sunbeam blinked unhappily. “Berryheart would put up with anything before she would accept help from you,” she finished. But even that idea was better than the other possibility—that her family had not shown up because Berryheart had already died. She pushed the thought away, unwilling to believe the worst. *At least if they left because they don’t trust Nightheart, that means Berryheart is still alive.*

Every hair on her pelt prickled with dread as she wondered what would happen to her family now.

Chapter 13

The day had been overcast, but as the sun went down, a breeze had sprung up and the sky had cleared. Now a full moon floated serenely above the trees as Frostpaw padded beside the ShadowClan cats on their way to the Gathering. They passed like shadows across the territory, their paws almost silent on the thick covering of pine needles.

Frostpaw's belly fluttered with apprehension as she and her companions drew closer to the tree-bridge that would take them to the Gathering island. Since the night when she and Puddleshine had overheard Splashtail and Podlight at the Moonpool, Tigerstar had done his best to convince the other leaders that Splashtail could not truly lead his Clan. Harestar had refused to take either side, while Leafstar had defended RiverClan's right to pick its own leader. Only Squirrelstar had agreed to back Tigerstar against Splashtail.

There are bound to be arguments tonight, Frostpaw thought. *Maybe bad enough to break the Gathering truce. Though that could be a good thing,* she argued with herself. *It might make StarClan show their disapproval of Splashtail once and for all.*

She drew a heavy sigh as the pines thinned out and the lake came into sight. She knew that it was her mission to stop Splashtail. He would only lead RiverClan to ruin; StarClan itself had told her so. But at the same time, it stung to see the other Clans making decisions about RiverClan's future.

The one spark of hope Frostpaw could see was her memory of what Mothwing had told her: Not every cat in RiverClan trusted Splashtail. Perhaps there still was a way for RiverClan to save itself.

When she arrived in the center of the Gathering island, Frostpaw followed Puddleshine and Shadowsight, slipping through the crowd of cats to take her place with the other medicine cats near the roots of the Great Oak. Squirrelstar and Leafstar had already leaped into the branches; a moment later Tigerstar joined them, finding a place on a sturdy branch that stretched out above the clearing.

Where he can be seen and heard, Frostpaw thought.

While every cat waited for WindClan, Frostpaw let her glance travel over the assembled cats, looking for her own Clan. Mothwing was with the other medicine cats; Duskfur, Icewing, and some others were clustered together at the edge of the clearing. So far she couldn't see Splashtail or Podlight.

Frostpaw's apprehension was rising, and it was a relief when the WindClan cats finally arrived, their slim, wiry bodies sliding easily through the bushes. Harestar leaped up to join the leaders among the branches of the Great Oak, while Crowfeather took his place among the roots.

A murmuring arose from the crowd, part puzzled, part impatient, as if they were waiting for Splashtail to make his appearance. The sound died away as Tigerstar rose to his paws and let out a commanding yowl. "Let the Gathering begin!"

At once there was a stir among the RiverClan warriors as Splashtail stepped out into the open, followed by Podlight. Cats drew away from them as they padded forward, until they stood in an open space beneath the tree.

"Greetings, Splashtail," Tigerstar meowed.

"Splash*star*." Podlight met Tigerstar's amber gaze and spoke out boldly. "He has received his nine lives and is now leader of RiverClan." He had a smug look on his face as he added, "RiverClan's troubles are finally over."

As soon as his medicine cat had finished speaking, Splashtail leaped up into the branches to take his place with the other leaders. A few cats yowled out, "Splashstar! Splashstar!" but it was a ragged sound that soon died away.

Frostpaw knew that Tigerstar had planned a speech exposing Splashtail's lies, but she also knew she couldn't stand by and do nothing. Every hair on her pelt was quivering with the need to speak out; she couldn't have stopped herself even if the whole of StarClan itself had appeared and ordered her to be silent.

She took a deep breath. "Liar!" she called out. "I know you didn't even speak to StarClan that night. I *saw* you mocking the whole ceremony, and I'm going to tell every cat the truth now!"

Splashtail gazed down at her, apparently unmoved. His voice was cool as he replied. "Once again Frostpaw, who is a known liar

and not even a member of RiverClan, claims to have secret knowledge of RiverClan's business. Tigerstar, surely it is time to throw this traitor out of the Clans for good? Or could it be that she has turned spy for ShadowClan?"

Fury flashed through Frostpaw, fierce as a lightning strike. But before she could speak, a growl erupted from Tigerstar, who faced Splashtail with murder in his amber eyes.

"*You* are the traitor, Splashtail!" His fur was bushed up until he looked twice his size. "How dare you lie to the Clans about the solemn granting of nine lives from StarClan? I believe Frostpaw, and I have chosen my side. It's time all of you chose yours," he added, turning to the other leaders. "It wasn't only Frostpaw who witnessed Splashtail's treachery, but Puddleshine as well. Puddleshine, tell them what you saw!"

At the command from his Clan leader, Puddleshine stepped forward. "It's true," he meowed, his voice rising across the clearing. "I heard Splashtail talk about lying to his Clanmates about the nine-lives ceremony. And not only that. I saw Riverstar appear, but Splashtail and Podlight couldn't even see him. After that, I can no longer doubt that Frostpaw is telling the truth. Splashtail is an impostor!"

At his words, a loud caterwauling rose from all the assembled cats; for a moment no cat could make themselves heard. Buffeted by the clamor, Frostpaw wondered if her outcry had been a mistake. Perhaps she should have kept quiet and let Tigerstar address the Gathering.

She kept her gaze fixed on Splashtail; he looked briefly disconcerted at the mention of Riverstar, but by the time Tigerstar had recovered control, signaling for silence, the false leader had regained his composure and looked as confident as ever.

Squirrelstar rose from her seat on the branch, clearly about to speak, but Splashtail interrupted her before she could get a word out.

"I am a true leader," he asserted, his gaze traveling over the assembled cats. "And you other leaders would do well to note who it is that speaks against me: a disgraced RiverClan exile, and the medicine cat from the Clan who *invaded* my Clan and tried to take us

over! There's no doubt in my mind that the more upheaval he can cause in RiverClan, the better Tigerstar will like it." Splashtail stood tall on his branch, his head erect and his chest puffed out. "I *am* Splashstar," he announced, "and unless you leaders know otherwise, you had better treat me with the respect my new name deserves. After all, what is the point of these Gatherings if the leaders can't even agree on who holds a rightful place in their Clan as leader or medicine cat?"

"A good question!" Tigerstar growled.

Splashtail slid his claws out, and Frostpaw, looking up, saw a wisp of cloud drifting perilously close to the moon. But before the Gathering truce could be broken, Leafstar rose and took a step forward, gazing down at Splashtail, who was standing on a branch just below her.

"Splashstar," she began, her tone quiet and controlled after the heated words of the two toms. "You make a good point that the cats speaking against you have suspicious motives. No living cat can question who StarClan chooses to appoint. I believe you, Splashstar."

Despair tore at Frostpaw like a claw as she listened to the SkyClan leader's words. Puddleshine was an honorable medicine cat, and yet Splashtail had managed to discredit him. Was any cat safe from his lies?

Splashtail dipped his head to the SkyClan leader in deepest respect. "Thank you," he meowed. "And now to move on with the business of the Gathering, I announce that I have chosen Harelight as my deputy."

"Harelight! Harelight!"

The acclamation was much more enthusiastic this time, but Frostpaw scarcely heard it. She was too deeply shocked to see her former mentor—a cat she had considered her friend—step forward to the roots of the Great Oak.

I can't believe that Harelight would work with a cat who tried to kill me!

For a heartbeat Harelight met her gaze, and Frostpaw thought she could see sadness in his eyes, and maybe guilt. Then the white

tom sprang up onto a root and raised his head to address the Gathering.

“We are still sorting out what happened in RiverClan,” he declared. “We still have to decide what we will do next. But one thing I know is that I want my Clan to be strong and independent. RiverClan must be in charge of its own destiny. So I want to help Splashstar rebuild our Clan. I want to prove to the rest of you that we can govern ourselves.”

“And to prove that we have StarClan’s favor,” Splashtail added, “Sneezecloud and Havenpelt have welcomed a new litter of kits for RiverClan: Floatkit, Rapidkit, and Troutkit.”

Yowls of welcome for the new kits followed Splashtail’s announcement. Frostpaw could tell that the mood of the Gathering was changing to support for Splashtail, as if the new kits truly did signal a new beginning in RiverClan.

Tigerstar, however, remained silent, his claws working in the bark of his tree branch. He did not try to make himself heard until the yowling had died away.

“I have made my views on Splashtail clear—” he began.

“Splash*star*,” the fake RiverClan leader interrupted him with an angry lash of his tail.

Tigerstar shook his head, continuing to address the rest of the Gathering. “No, Splash*tail* is a liar who does not truly have the backing of StarClan. Cats of all Clans, we all know what has happened in the past when we have not had StarClan’s guidance. Harestar,” he continued, turning to the WindClan leader, “you are the one leader who wanted to take time to consider both sides before you decided to accept Splashtail as leader of RiverClan. Have you given the matter thought?”

Every cat’s gaze turned toward the WindClan leader. Now there was utter silence in the clearing, and it felt almost unbearably heavy to Frostpaw. She realized how important Harestar’s decision would be: It was going to make the difference between a majority of the Clans opposing Splashtail, or a majority standing with him.

Harestar stepped forward, thrusting aside the leaves that had half concealed him until now. His gaze traveled slowly over Splashtail and the other three leaders. “I have thought hard about this,” he told

them, “and I have consulted my senior warriors. I have to admit that not all of them agree with my decision.”

“So what *is* your decision?” Tigerstar growled. “Spit it out!”

“I see good arguments on both sides,” Harestar continued, with a chilly glance at the ShadowClan leader. “However, I can’t forget that Frostpaw admitted in the past that she made up her visions, and she enticed my medicine-cat apprentice to lie on her behalf. That is why I have decided that I will recognize Splashstar as leader of RiverClan. They have every right to choose their own leader, and it seems they all support Splashstar.”

Frostpaw felt a hollowness in her chest as the cats of RiverClan broke out into loud yowls of acclamation—far more enthusiastic than their earlier welcome. Clearly, they did support their new leader.

“RiverClan will be the strongest Clan!” some cat yowled, and another added, “The rest of you will know better than to mess with us in the future!”

“Well, I suppose that’s settled,” Tigerstar growled. “I know that RiverClan’s leadership is a RiverClan issue—*unless* it threatens other Clans.” He gave Splashtail a hard look as he spoke the last few words. “I will not make any move to interfere in RiverClan’s affairs,” he continued. “I will only go on defending ShadowClan, and StarClan, with every whisker of my being.”

He glanced at Squirrelstar, who returned his look, one of mingled frustration and acceptance.

With a pang of regret, Frostpaw realized the argument was over. No Clan would make a move to oust Splashtail, but at least he had been given a warning: If he did prove to be a danger to the Clans, Tigerstar and Squirrelstar would not hesitate to deal with him.

“RiverClan, please accept my congratulations on your new leader,” Harestar meowed, dipping his head to the distant crowd of RiverClan cats beside the bushes. “I hope that soon all this will be behind you. Maybe one day, Harelight, the Clans will have two Harestars, but in the meantime let’s move on.

“I have news to report,” the WindClan leader continued. “Featherpelt and Oatclaw of WindClan have welcomed kits as well: Leafkit, Branchkit, and Grasskit.” He waited while yowls of “Featherpelt!” rose up from the cats below; Frostpaw sensed relief

that the question of Splashtail's leadership had been decided and the leaders could continue with the ordinary business of a Gathering. It wasn't a relief that she could share, feeling only apprehension of what the future would bring.

"I've more concerning news, too," Harestar went on when he could make himself heard again. "Something you need to hear, Tigerstar. WindClan cats have seen Berryheart and her kin on the edge of our territory. From what my warriors tell me, they don't seem to be doing well."

An awkward murmur came from the cats in the clearing; some cats sounded sympathetic, while others gave dismissive flicks of ears and tails, seeming to think that Berryheart and the others had asked for whatever trouble they were in.

Frostpaw glanced at Tigerstar, but he gave no outward reaction except for a curt nod at Harestar.

Harestar took a step back, sitting on his branch once again, and Squirrelstar rose. She gestured with her tail for Wasp and Waffle to come forward.

"Our visitors from outside the Clans have been in ThunderClan long enough to get a good taste of Clan life," she began when the two park cats were standing side by side beneath the Great Oak. "We agreed that by the time of this Gathering you would have made your decision. So, have you done that? Do you want to stay or go?"

Wasp and Waffle looked at each other, as if silently deciding who would speak first. Frostpaw searched for Nightheart among the ThunderClan cats. There was a tension in his expression that reflected what she herself was feeling.

"I want to go home," Wasp responded at last, with a respectful dip of his head. "I came because I wanted to join Frostpaw in RiverClan, and I don't think that's possible now. I have decided to return to the park." There was deep regret in his voice, and his gaze was fixed wistfully on the group of RiverClan cats.

Disappointment crushed Frostpaw like a heavy rock, that she hadn't been able to bring the brown tom to a RiverClan where he could make a new life among cats who were surely his distant kin. Yet at the same time she felt strangely justified. The RiverClan that

Wasp had grown up dreaming of did not exist right now, and he was proving it by leaving.

"I'll be sorry to lose you, Wasp," Squirrelstar responded. "You would have made a valuable Clanmate. And what about you, Waffle?" she asked, turning to the other park cat. "Will you go with your friend?"

"No, Squirrelstar," Waffle replied, his eyes shining with excitement. "I want to stay in ThunderClan, if you'll have me. I've grown to love my new home, and I've made friends among your cats."

Squirrelstar let out a purr of pleasure. "You've already proven yourself, Waffle, and you're welcome to become a ThunderClan apprentice. Your name will be Wafflepaw, and we shall find you a suitable mentor."

"Thank you, Squirrelstar!" Waffle responded joyfully.

Frostpaw had to crush down a spurt of jealousy as she listened to their exchange. It wasn't often, in these troubled times, that a cat saw a Clan leader make reasonable decisions without any wailing or snarling or fluffing up of fur.

When no other cat spoke, Tigerstar stepped forward again. "The Gathering is at an end," he announced; his shoulders were hunched and his voice was resigned. "And may we not regret the decisions we have made tonight," he added more quietly.

As Frostpaw watched Splashtail lead the RiverClan cats out of the clearing, she felt a pang of anger and sadness to be leaving her friends and Clanmates in the paws of an impostor. But she knew she could do nothing about it that wouldn't end with the unnecessary spilling of blood.

Maybe Tigerstar is right. If Splashtail is to be ousted, it has to start within RiverClan.

Weary and discouraged, Frostpaw trailed behind the ShadowClan cats on their way back to camp. As she was crossing the stretch of ThunderClan stuff that separated the two territories, she picked up fresh RiverClan scent coming from behind her and spun around to see the shadowy shape of a cat lurking among the vegetation she had just left behind.

Fear slammed into Frostpaw's throat. She was convinced that this must be Splashtail coming after her, to finish what he had failed to do on WindClan's moor.

"Stop!" she called out to the vanishing ShadowClan cats. "Come back!"

She wasn't sure if any cat had heard her. She gathered herself to flee, but before she could move, two cats came slinking out of the shadows. Frostpaw recognized Duskfur and Icewing.

Frostpaw stood still and waited for them, though every muscle in her body was still tense. She wasn't sure that she could trust any RiverClan cat now, except for Mothwing. These two she-cats hadn't let out a squeak of protest tonight, or at the previous Gathering when Splashtail had claimed the leadership. Duskfur had even supported him—outwardly, at least.

"We don't have much time, Frostpaw," Icewing mewed in a rapid undertone, "but we came to tell you that you're not alone. You're a true RiverClan cat, and so are we, and we believe you."

"We're working on bringing more RiverClan cats over to our side," Duskfur assured her.

Frostpaw felt a warm spring of hope at her Clanmates' words. *Maybe Splashtail won't be leader for very long!*

"It's vital that you do that." Tigerstar's voice came from behind Frostpaw as the ShadowClan leader stalked up to them.

"Yes, if RiverClan is to be saved, it has to be saved from within," Frostpaw added.

"That won't be easy," Icewing responded, though her tone was determined. "Splashtail has a talent for manipulating other cats. But he can't keep it up forever. Mothwing is with us, too, and we won't give up."

"And my littermates?" Frostpaw asked eagerly. "Are Mistpaw and Graypaw working with you?"

Icewing and Duskfur glanced at each other. "Your littermates doubt Splashtail," Duskfur replied, "but we've advised them to keep it quiet for now. If it comes down to a battle, we can count on their help. Still, they're young, and I want to protect them as much as I can."

That made sense to Frostpaw . . . though a part of her wished that Duskfur had been as concerned with protecting *her* when she was a confused apprentice. “Is there anything I can do to help you?” she asked, changing the subject. “I’ll do whatever I can. I’m not scared of Splashtail,” she added, pushing away the memory of how afraid she had felt when she’d thought the false leader was pursuing her.

“Then you ought to be,” Tigerstar growled. “Are you mouse-brained? You’re the only RiverClan cat who can reach StarClan. Splashtail won’t feel secure until he’s turned you into crow-food.”

Thanks for that insight, Tigerstar, Frostpaw thought but didn’t dare say aloud. “I suppose you’re right,” she sighed.

“If there is anything you can do, we’ll send you word,” Duskfur promised, touching noses with Frostpaw. “But we won’t let you take any risks.”

With that, the two she-cats melted back into the shadows. “May StarClan light your path!” Frostpaw called after them.

She headed back to ShadowClan with a spring in her step. She felt as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Splashtail was far from safe in his leadership. With cats like Icewing and Duskfur believing her, she felt much more hopeful that RiverClan could be saved after all.

Frostpaw stood on the bank of a river that cut a deep channel through high moorland. She had never seen the place before; it looked like a strange mixture of WindClan and RiverClan territory.

Wind whipped around Frostpaw, threatening to carry her off her paws and fling her down into the river. She dug her claws hard into the tough moorland grass. Her eyes began to water as a strong gust hit her in the face. Blinking to clear her vision, Frostpaw spotted Reedwhisker on the opposite bank. Stars glittered around his paws, and his pelt shimmered with starlight.

The former deputy gazed solemnly at Frostpaw. “It’s not over,” he announced.

Before Frostpaw could respond, a claw of lightning crackled down the sky. It split the river in two: One half flowed calm and true,

while the other churned as if it was full of rocks, the surface swirling and tossing up foam.

Reedwhisker had vanished, but Frostpaw could hear yowling from behind her. She was reluctant to turn away from the river—she was sure it had more to teach her about her Clan—but when she spun around, she saw that a huge storm was tearing up the moor.

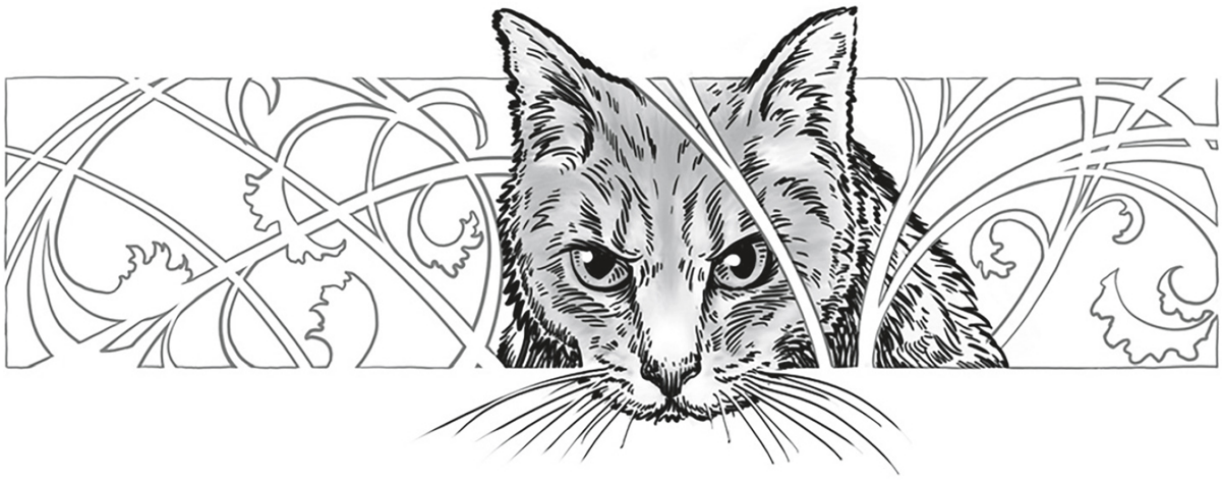
Frostpaw herself seemed to stand in a peaceful bubble, while all around her rocks flew through the air and crashed down, gouging deep craters in the earth. Trees groaned as they were torn up by the roots and fell with a sound like thunder. Springs of water bubbled up from beneath the ground and surged downhill, carrying rocks along in the force of their current.

Above the clamor of the storm, Frostpaw could hear the screeches of terrified kits. “Where are you?” she cried out. “I’m coming!”

But instead of any reply, a vast shadow passed overhead. A heartbeat later, everything was blotted out in deep darkness.

Frostpaw jerked upright in her nest in the ShadowClan medicine cats’ den. Her heart was thumping in her chest.

WindClan is in trouble! We have to do something!



Chapter 14

Squirrelstar's voice rang out clearly across the camp. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!"

Nightheart raised his head from his nest in the warriors' den and blinked blearily. The worst thing about attending a Gathering was waking up the morning after. But the cheerful note in Squirrelstar's voice pricked his curiosity; he rose and shook debris off his pelt before slipping out of the den and joining his Clanmates underneath the Highledge.

Spotting Sunbeam at the edge of the crowd, he went to sit beside her. The lingering scent of mouse bile on her fur told him that she had been on tick duty again.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

Sunbeam nodded, but she had no chance to say anything more, as Squirrelstar began to speak.

"For once I have good news to announce," the Clan meowed. "Waffle has decided to stay in ThunderClan. So he, Bristlekit, Graykit, and Stemkit will all be apprenticed today."

A murmur of delight rose from the assembled cats. Nightheart spotted Waffle gazing up at Squirrelstar, his whole body shivering with anticipation. Outside the nursery Spotfur was frantically trying to groom her kits' fur, while they squirmed around and let out squeaks of excitement.

Squirrelstar ran lightly down the tumbled rocks and stood in the center of the camp. The rest of the Clan formed a ragged circle around her. Nightheart felt a spring of optimism bubbling up inside him. The making of apprentices was a sign that in spite of the Clans' present troubles, their way of life and his own beloved Clan would survive into the future.

"Waffle, we'll begin with you," Squirrelstar meowed, beckoning with her tail. "Come here, please."

The gray-and-brown tabby tom padded out into the center of the circle to join Squirrelstar, holding his head and his tail high.

Squirrelstar rested her tail-tip on Waffle's shoulder. "From this day forward," she announced, "this apprentice will be known as Wafflepaw. Nightheart, you will be his mentor."

Nightheart looked up in surprise. "Me?" he gasped.

Squirrelstar nodded. "Who better? You may have had a rough start, but you have shown yourself to be a loyal and dedicated warrior. In returning to ThunderClan, you proved that you have a respect and appreciation for your Clan that is maybe unrivaled. And you never fail to help those in need, even when doing so is inconvenient and hard. That sums up the qualities needed to be a good mentor, which can sometimes be trying."

From somewhere behind him Nightheart heard a *mrrow* of amusement coming from Brambleclaw. "Squirrelstar knows all about that! Dustpelt had his work cut out mentoring *her*."

Nightheart didn't know whether Squirrelstar had heard that; in any case, she paid no attention.

"Nightheart," she continued, "I know you will pass your excellent qualities on to Wafflepaw." She bent her head and added softly in Wafflepaw's ear, "Now go and touch noses with him."

Wafflepaw bounded across to Nightheart, who stooped down to touch his nose. His eyes were shining as he whispered, "I'm glad it's you!"

"Wafflepaw! Wafflepaw!" the Clan yowled in acclamation. Though Wafflepaw hadn't lived in ThunderClan for long, his enthusiasm for Clan life had clearly made him popular.

But as the yowling died away, Nightheart heard Shellfur's voice, coming from a few places farther around the circle.

"We haven't had apprentices yet," he grumbled, loud enough that he didn't seem bothered if any cat heard him. "And we've been warriors far longer than this upstart."

"Yeah," Honeyfur agreed. "I'd bet a moon of dawn patrols that he's only getting the honor because he's Firestar's kin."

Once, Nightheart realized, he might have hurled himself at Honeyfur, furious at the insult—and from his father's littermate, no less. Now he did no more than roll his eyes.

"Enough!" Squirrelstar glared at the two complaining warriors, her dark ginger fur bristling. "Nightheart is building a legacy all his own,"

she continued. “He has more than earned this honor, and with the bravery and resourcefulness he has shown, I believe that he could teach certain older warriors a thing or two.”

Neither Shellfur nor Honeyfur could meet the Clan leader’s gaze; instead they bowed their heads and studied their paws.

“Nightheart, you can begin training Wafflepaw right away,” Squirrelstar meowed.

“Thank you, Squirrelstar,” Nightheart responded. “I won’t let you down.”

“See that you don’t,” his Clan leader told him. “But to keep you on the right track, you won’t be starting your duties as a mentor alone. Now it’s time to make more apprentices.”

One by one Squirrelstar called Spotfur’s kits to her, gave them their apprentice names, and assigned them to mentors: Bayshine for Bristlepaw, Finchlight for Graypaw, and Molewhisker for Stempaw.

“Bristlepaw! Graypaw! Stempaw!”

As the Clan caterwauled their welcome, Nightheart exchanged pleased grins with Bayshine and Finchlight. They had all waited so long for this day, and Nightheart found it hard to believe it was really happening. He was even more excited about being a mentor knowing he could train his apprentice alongside his sister and his best friend.

To think that not long ago I wanted to leave ThunderClan for good! Now I don’t think there is anywhere I would rather be.

“Congratulations,” Sunbeam purred into his ear.

“Thank you,” Nightheart responded. “I’m just sorry that you got caught and have to do all the apprentice duties.”

Sunbeam shrugged. “It’s okay. It could have been worse. I wish Crowfeather had let me go,” she continued, “but I understand. I was in the wrong, and he was actually nicer about it than some cats might have been.”

Nicer? Crowfeather? Nightheart thought, then remembered how understanding the WindClan deputy had seemed when he’d returned Sunbeam to the ThunderClan camp.

“I’ve got to go and clean out the elders’ bedding now,” Sunbeam mewed. “It’s not my favorite duty, but they do need to be taken care

of. And besides, soon I'll have Wafflepaw, Bristlepaw, Graypaw, and Stempaw to help!"

Nightheart was impressed with how calmly she was accepting her punishment. It was just one more reason to love her.

"I feel I'll be even more worthy of you, now that I'm a mentor," he told her. "I can't believe what Squirrelstar said about me! Brave, resourceful, loyal . . . I would never have expected her to praise me like that."

"Why not, you silly furball?" Sunbeam purred. "You are all those things."

Nightheart twined his tail with hers. "Squirrelstar was right that I had a bad start," he explained. "And I doubted myself for a long time. But now I feel I'm ready for my paws to walk along this new path—and that's partly because of your belief in me," he added, pressing himself against her side. "I know I haven't been here for you as much as you were for me when I was in ShadowClan, but I promise I'm going to make it up to you."

"It was your duty to leave," Sunbeam assured him. "And now I'm so proud of you!" Her sincerity shone in her eyes. "I know you'll be a wonderful mentor."

"I hope that's true," Nightheart responded, "since I now have to take Wafflepaw out for his first training session."

"Good luck," Sunbeam meowed. "I'll be waiting to hear all about it when you get back."

Nightheart headed toward the thorn tunnel, excitement thrilling through him for his first duties as a mentor. Before he had gone more than a fox-length, he turned back to say goodbye to Sunbeam one last time. Her pride and enthusiasm had faded, and he thought he could detect a note of sadness in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Sunbeam shook her head. "I'm fine," she assured him. "Just a bit tired. I'll see you when you get back."

Not entirely convinced, Nightheart crossed the camp to join his Clanmates at the entrance to the tunnel. Molewhisker had already left with Stempaw, but Bayshine and Finchlight were waiting for him with their apprentices. Wafflepaw was with them too, and Wasp standing a little way off.

“Right,” Nightheart meowed. “Wafflepaw, it’s time to tour the territory.”

Wafflepaw gave a little skip of excitement. “This is so great!” he exclaimed. “But I wish you were coming with us, Wasp. I’ll miss you when you go back to the park.”

“You’ll be fine,” the brown tom responded, padding forward to touch noses with his former parkmate. “You’re going to be a great warrior!”

“Then let’s get started.” Bayshine cast an approving glance at the other mentors and their apprentices. “The first thing we need to do is show you ThunderClan’s part of the forest.”

Spotfur’s kits, who had only been allowed out of camp once before, for one of Sunbeam’s trials, let out squeals of excitement. Wafflepaw was also looking eager, even though he had seen most of the territory on patrols with Nightheart.

“It won’t be long before you know every paw step of the forest just as well as the rest of us,” Nightheart promised. “So let’s get started.”

Nightheart and the other two mentors headed for the lake to start the tour of the territory. Wafflepaw padded along calmly at Nightheart’s shoulder, but Graypaw and Bristlepaw scampered about, letting out excited squeaks as they jumped over fallen branches and stuck their noses into every hole and cranny as they passed.

They seem so young, he thought, reminding himself that it wasn’t all that long since he himself had been a scatterbrained apprentice, struggling to concentrate on all the skills that he had to learn before he could become a warrior.

But I learned them all, he told himself. *And it might have taken me a while to earn my warrior name, but I did get there in the end. And now I have a mate, and an apprentice.* The weight of his responsibilities overwhelmed him for a moment; he paused and took a deep breath. *I can do this!*

A screech of amazement from Bristlepaw jerked Nightheart from his thoughts. They had reached the edge of the trees and halted to look out over the lake.

“It’s so *big*!” Graypaw gasped. “What’s on the other side?”

“The other Clans’ territories,” Finchlight replied. “Over there, where you can see the bleak moorland? That’s where WindClan lives. Next to that, with all the trees and bushes and the stream running out, is RiverClan’s territory, and ShadowClan has the part where the dark pine trees stretch down nearly to the water’s edge.”

“And next to us here is SkyClan,” Bayshine added. “We’re going to carry on along their border.”

“What’s that yucky smell?” Bristlepaw asked as the patrol turned away from the lake and headed back into the forest.”

“That’s the scent of the SkyClan border markers,” Nightheart told her.

“So SkyClan is a stinky Clan?” Graypaw wrinkled his nose. “I don’t think I want to meet them.”

“They are not stinky,” Finchlight told the apprentices severely. “Their scent is different from ours, that’s all—*they* probably don’t like ThunderClan scent. Don’t let me ever hear any of you call any cat’s scent yucky or stinky.”

Graypaw and Bristlepaw ducked their heads, repentant. “I won’t, Finchlight,” said Graypaw.

“Neither will I,” Bristlepaw added. “I promise.”

The patrol had left the SkyClan border behind and was making its way along the edge of ThunderClan territory when Nightheart picked up another scent and halted to work out where it was coming from.

“What’s that?” Bristlepaw asked.

“It’s yucky!” Graypaw exclaimed, then added hastily, “I mean, it’s *different*.”

“It’s okay,” Finchlight told him, a gleam of amusement in her eyes. “You can call that one yucky. It’s a scent that no cat likes.”

“Wafflepaw, do you know what it is?” Nightheart asked his apprentice. “We came across it once when I took you on patrol.”

Wafflepaw raised his head and took a deep sniff. “I think it’s fox, Nightheart,” he mewed at last.

“Quite right.” Nightheart felt a warm pulse of pride that his apprentice had remembered. “And what do we do about it?”

Before Wafflepaw could reply, Graypaw began jumping up and down. “Where is it? I want to see the fox!”

“So do I!” Bristlepaw squealed.

“No, you don’t,” Bayshine told them. “While you’re apprentices, you need to stay far away from foxes. They would gobble you up, just like you would eat a mouse.”

The young cats’ excitement faded; they stared around them with huge, scared eyes.

“But there’s nothing to be afraid of now,” Nightheart reassured them. “This fox’s scent is stale. It probably passed through here about three days ago.”

“All the same, we’d better report it,” Bayshine meowed.

“We will,” Nightheart agreed. “Now, all of you, have a good sniff, so you’ll recognize the scent when you come across it again.”

The tour of the territory ended by the lakeshore, where the WindClan border stream flowed out into the lake.

“We’ve learned so much!” Bristlepaw exclaimed. “SkyClan scent, and WindClan scent . . .”

Graypaw opened his jaws to speak, but then closed them again. Nightheart purred, amused. The new apprentice had only just remembered what he wasn’t supposed to say.

“And we’ve learned mouse and squirrel scents,” Bristlepaw continued.

“And fox scent,” Wafflepaw added.

“Thank StarClan it was stale,” Nightheart declared. “The fox must have been just passing through.”

“What would you do if you smelled fresh fox scent?” Bayshine asked the apprentices.

Graypaw jumped up and down with excitement. “Follow it! Teach the mangy fox a lesson.”

Bayshine shook his head. “Bristlepaw? Wafflepaw?”

“I would go back to camp and report it,” Wafflepaw replied after a moment’s thought. “Then the Clan leader could send out a patrol to track the fox and deal with it.”

“Exactly.” Once again Nightheart felt pleased that his apprentice had come up with the right answer. “Graypaw, remember what we told you. Following the fox would be a very brave thing to do, but sometimes it’s best to rely on your Clanmates.”

Graypaw nodded. “I understand, Nightheart.”

“Anyway, it’s time we were getting back to camp,” Finchlight meowed. “We’ve done quite enough training for one day.”

“Oh, no!” Bristlepaw protested. “We’re not tired. We can do more.”

“Yeah, I want to show you my hunter’s crouch,” Graypaw added. “I learned it already, when we helped Sunbeam with her task, and now I want to catch prey to feed my Clan.”

“And soon you will,” Finchlight promised him. “But not today. I don’t know about you, but my paws feel as if they’re falling off.”

She took the lead as the group of cats headed back to the stone hollow, following the route along the old Thunderpath. Sunhigh was long past, and the shadows of the trees were growing longer. Nightheart felt as though he were walking down a long tunnel, with the branches whispering overhead.

“Why are the plants so short in this part of the forest?” Graypaw asked, glancing at the lush undergrowth on either side of the path.

“Long, long ago, this used to be a Thunderpath,” Nightheart replied. “Twolegs made it, just like they made the stone hollow.”

Bristlepaw stretched her eyes wide. “Twolegs made our camp?”

“Well, they cut the stone out,” Bayshine told her. “And then they went away. But they left us a nice easy track for tired paws. Hurry up now, and you can all have some fresh-kill when you get back to camp.”

“Great!” Graypaw yowled.

The two young apprentices scampered ahead. Wafflepaw exchanged a glance with Nightheart, looking slightly hesitant, then hurried to catch up with them. Nightheart guessed that it would be difficult for him to train with cats who were so much younger.

I need to make sure he gets some useful one-on-one time with me, Nightheart thought.

“I’m going to be the best warrior!” Graypaw boasted. “I know all the battle moves!”

“No, you’re not—I am!” Bristlepaw gave him a sharp nudge with her shoulder. “I’m going to be Clan leader one day! Bristlestar!”

Meanwhile, Wafflepaw was padding alongside them; he said nothing, but his tail was curled up in amusement.

Nightheart exchanged a glance with Bayshine and Finchlight. “Where do we even start with them?” Bayshine murmured.

Thinking back to one of his first training sessions with Lilyheart, Nightheart suppressed a *mrrow* of laughter. “I have a plan.”

Bayshine and Finchlight exchanged a glance, their eyes sparkling with glee. “Tell us!” Bayshine murmured.

Nightheart beckoned to his two fellow mentors, drawing them close to him. “This is what we’re going to do . . . ,” he whispered.

Heartbeats later, the three mentors melted silently into the undergrowth on either side of the old Thunderpath. Slipping through the long grass, setting his paws down as lightly as if he were stalking a mouse, he caught up with the three apprentices. Bristlepaw and Graypaw were still wrangling over who would be the best warrior, and boasting about their warrior skills.

We’ll see about that, Nightheart thought.

He could tell from slight movement in the undergrowth that his fellow mentors were in position. Springing to his paws, he yowled, “Now!”

All three mentors leaped out of cover, letting out fearsome screeches as they hurled themselves at the apprentices. Bristlepaw and Graypaw stretched their eyes wide with horror. Bristlepaw fled wailing into a nearby bramble thicket. Graypaw tried to climb a tree and got stuck a couple of tail-lengths up the trunk with his claws digging into the bark.

Meanwhile Wafflepaw had collapsed onto one side, his tail and paws waving as his whole body shook with laughter.

“It’s okay—it’s only us,” Nightheart called, wondering if he had been too harsh. “You can come back now.”

“I can’t!” Bristlepaw mewed pitifully. “I’m all caught up in the brambles.”

“I can’t get down!” Graypaw whimpered.

Bayshine padded over to his apprentice and pulled the tendrils aside so that she could creep out, her fur sticking up in all directions. Meanwhile Finchlight stood at the bottom of the tree and encouraged Graypaw to let himself down onto her back.

“So, what have we learned?” Nightheart asked when all three apprentices were standing together in front of him.

“To watch what’s going on around us,” Graypaw replied.

“And scent our surroundings, too,” Bristlepaw added. “If we’d done that, we’d have known that there weren’t any enemies sneaking up on us.”

“Very good,” Finchlight meowed. “And why weren’t you paying attention?”

The two apprentices exchanged guilty glances. “We were too busy arguing about who would be the best warrior,” Graypaw admitted.

“Right,” Nightheart responded. “Remember, there’s no room for boasting in a Clan. Warriors are made, not born, and every cat has their own strengths and weaknesses.”

“We’ll remember.” Bristlepaw’s head and tail were drooping. “We’re sorry we were so stupid.”

“Cheer up,” Nightheart encouraged them. “It’s only your first day, after all. And if it helps, I remember the elders telling me stories about Squirrelstar when she was an apprentice. She used to get stuck all the time: in bramble thickets, Twoleg fences, deep holes . . . you name it, she got stuck in it.”

“Really?” Bristlepaw brightened up instantly. “When we get back to camp, can we take prey to the elders, and maybe they will tell us those stories?”

“Of course you can,” Finchlight responded. “So let’s go.”

Nightheart noticed that for the rest of the way back to the stone hollow all three apprentices were glancing around carefully, pausing to taste the air and pricking their ears to listen to the forest sounds.

“That was a great lesson,” Bayshine murmured. “Look at them now!”

Nightheart twitched his ears at Wafflepaw, beckoning him to his side. “So what did you learn today?” he asked.

Wafflepaw thought for a moment. “How effective surprise can be,” he answered eventually. “That could be useful when we’re hunting, or if we have to fight some cat.”

“That’s a great answer,” Nightheart told her, warm with pride in him; he had done really well in his first lesson. “Go on like that, and it won’t be long before you earn your warrior name.”

Wafflepaw's eyes glowed at his praise, while Nightheart felt every hair on his pelt tingling with satisfaction. He really had taught the apprentices something useful. *I actually think I'll be pretty good at this mentorship thing.*

As soon as they returned to camp, Nightheart grabbed a vole from the fresh-kill pile and went looking for Sunbeam. He wanted to share prey with her while he told her about his first outing with Wafflepaw.

But when he found his mate, she was crouching behind the warriors' den, her gaze fixed in the distance, toward WindClan's territory. She looked lost, and her eyes were filled with sorrow.

She startled when she saw Nightheart and sat up, obviously making a massive effort to pretend that everything was okay. "How did your training session go?" she asked. Her voice sounded hoarse, as if she had almost forgotten how to use it.

Nightheart set his vole down. "Never mind my training session, for now," he mewed gently. "Tell me what the matter is."

Several moments slid by before Sunbeam replied. "I'm so worried about my parents and my brother," she admitted at last. "I almost wish I hadn't found them, because then I wouldn't know how scrawny they looked, and how badly injured Berryheart is."

She rose and began to pace back and forth; Nightheart could see her grief and frustration in every paw step, every twitch of her whiskers.

"I wish there were something I could do," she meowed. "But I don't know what."

Nightheart was still full of confidence from his successful training session. "I'll help you, Sunbeam," he promised. "There has to be a way to help your kin—right? And we'll find it together."

Chapter 15

The sky was covered in cloud and the air beneath the trees felt damp and heavy, but there was a spring in Sunbeam's step as she headed toward the lake with Lionblaze and Twigbranch. Even though her anxiety about her family was always with her, like a weight fastened to her tail that she had to drag behind her, she couldn't help enjoying her new freedom.

"How does it feel to be out of prison?" Twigbranch asked; her tone was teasing but her eyes friendly.

"I was very glad when Squirrelstar told me my punishment was over," Sunbeam responded fervently. "It's so good to be off tick duty and den cleaning, and even better to be out hunting again."

"I can scent squirrels." Twigbranch paused to taste the air. "And I think there's a mouse nest among the roots of that tree," she added, pointing with her tail.

Lionblaze had already dropped into the hunter's crouch and begun stalking carefully up to the heap of debris that had piled up under the tree's roots. His paws skimmed the ground so lightly that he seemed to float.

When he pounced, both his forepaws thudding down to scatter twigs and dead leaves, a mouse darted out of shelter and headed for the two she-cats; Twigbranch shot out a paw and brought it down hard.

"Thank you, StarClan, for this prey," she mewed.

Meanwhile Lionblaze was padding back toward them with another mouse dangling limply from his jaws. "That's a good start," he declared cheerfully, dropping it beside Twigbranch's kill. "Let's bury these and see what else we can find."

Her Clanmates' success made Sunbeam even more determined to make a good catch of her own. A cold breeze had sprung up, rustling the branches of the trees and carrying delicious prey-scents toward the hunting cats. Sunbeam felt her jaws start to water.

Picking up the scent of a squirrel, she glanced around carefully and spotted it hopping across a stretch of clear ground between two trees. The breeze was blowing its scent toward her. Her Clanmates

were busy burying the mice, so Sunbeam began creeping toward it, her belly fur brushing the ground and her tail tucked along her side. Paw step by paw step she drew closer, the squirrel seemingly unaware of her.

Sunbeam could already imagine sinking her teeth into her prey's juicy flesh when she set her paw down on a twig. The sudden *crack* warned the squirrel; it sat up, alert, then began racing toward the nearest tree.

"Mouse dung!" Sunbeam hissed.

Hurtling after the squirrel, she covered the forest floor with massive bounds and grabbed it with her forepaws just as it reached the foot of the tree. A swift bite to its neck and she turned to carry her prey proudly back to her Clanmates.

"Good catch!" Twigbranch exclaimed.

Lionblaze gave her a nod of approval and began enlarging the hole to bury the squirrel beside the two mice. But before he had finished, he stopped pawing at the earth and raised his head, his eyes dark with concern.

"Why have you stopped?" Sunbeam asked.

"I can scent a storm coming," Lionblaze replied.

He had barely finished speaking when Sunbeam heard the pattering of rain on the leaves above her head.

"We need to find shelter," Twigbranch meowed.

Lionblaze hastily shoved the squirrel into the hole and scraped earth over it, while Sunbeam and Twigbranch looked around for somewhere they could retreat until the rain stopped. The clouds were already darker and the wind was growing stronger; as she gazed around, Sunbeam could see the lake through the trees, its gray water whipped into waves.

"Look!" Twigbranch cried, angling her ears toward a slanting boulder in the middle of a clump of holly bushes. "We can stay under there until the rain stops."

All three cats streaked toward the bushes, but as Lionblaze, in the lead, was about to plunge into the center he skidded to a halt, rearing back and letting out a yowl of surprise.

"What's the matter?" Sunbeam asked, trying not to sound irritated, though cold raindrops were already soaking her pelt.

Looking over Lionblaze's shoulder, she spotted a pale blur crouching against the boulder; a heartbeat later she recognized Frostpaw.

"What are you doing here?" the golden tabby tom demanded.

"Never mind that." Twigbranch gave him a shove. "Get inside first and ask questions afterward."

Frostpaw's eyes were wide and scared as the three ThunderClan cats squashed into the dry space in the center of the bushes. She was shivering slightly, and her pelt was damp with rain. "I'm sorry," she mewed. "I know I'm more than three tail-lengths from the lake, but I had to find shelter until the storm is over."

"That's okay," Lionblaze reassured her. "No cat will blame you for being here in weather like this."

"But what are you doing on ThunderClan territory in the first place?" Sunbeam asked.

"I was on my way to WindClan," Frostpaw explained. "But then the dark clouds rolled in and the rain started. I thought I could wait here until it stopped, but now it doesn't look like it will." She flexed her claws in and out, frustration in her eyes. "I have to get to WindClan right now!" she added, peering out of the bushes at the rain-lashed forest. "I wonder if I should chance it before the storm gets any worse."

Sunbeam didn't understand why it was so important for Frostpaw to go to WindClan. They were hardly likely to welcome her, after Harestar had come out on Splashtail's side at the last Gathering.

"I don't think going there now is a good idea," she told Frostpaw. "After all, if the wind is bad here, it's bound to be worse on their territory. There aren't as many trees there to break up the gusts."

"I have to risk it," Frostpaw responded.

She said no more, and Sunbeam didn't question her further. *She's a medicine cat. Maybe she knows something we don't.*

Frostpaw squeezed past the ThunderClan cats and stuck her head out of the bushes. "I think the wind has died down a bit," she meowed. "I'm going to take advantage of the lull and make a run for it." Glancing over her shoulder at the others, she added, "You should get back to your camp, too. This is going to be a terrible storm."

She slipped out of the shelter; Sunbeam caught a glimpse of her pelting along the lakeshore, her tail streaming out behind her and her belly fur brushing the ground. “I think she’s right,” she declared. “We should go while we still can.”

“Fine,” Lionblaze responded, “but we’re taking our catch with us.”

After digging up the mice and squirrel, the three cats bounded through the forest until they reached the stone hollow. As they dropped their prey on the fresh-kill pile, Sunbeam noticed Squirrelstar heading down the tumbled rocks to the floor of the camp.

“Good, you’re back,” the Clan leader meowed, padding up to them. “That’s almost every cat.” She tilted her head back to gaze up at the lowering clouds. “This is no time to be out of camp.”

“I don’t think this will be an ordinary storm,” Sunbeam murmured, remembering what Frostpaw had said. “I think it’s going to be bad.”

Squirrelstar nodded slowly. “I’ve experienced my share of bad storms,” she responded, “and I think you’re right. Ivypool!” she called to her deputy, whose head and shoulders were poking out of the warriors’ den as she peered at the sky. When Ivypool hurried up to her, she added, “We need to tell the warriors to secure all the dens and prepare for a storm.”

Ivypool nodded briskly. “Sunbeam, you’ve been caring for the elders,” she mewed. “Tell them to stay put. Make sure they’re safe in their den and have enough fresh-kill, in case they have to stay there for a long time.”

Sunbeam grabbed the squirrel she had just caught and raced with it across to the elders’ den. Brambleclaw and the other elders were huddled at the back, sheltered by the rock wall and the branches of the hazel bush.

“Ivypool says you’re to stay here,” she gasped. “It looks as if the storm will be a bad one. I’ll bring you some more fresh-kill so you don’t have to come out.”

“We’ve seen storms worse than this, youngster,” Thornclaw growled. “We’ll be fine.”

“Remember the Great Storm?” Cloudtail asked, nudging Brambleclaw. “Now *that* was a storm.”

Brambleclaw grunted. “Will I ever forget it?”

Brightheart passed her tongue around her jaws. “That looks like a good plump squirrel,” she mewed appreciatively. “Thanks, Sunbeam.”

Sunbeam ducked her head and left the den. The rain had grown heavier, and even in the sheltered stone hollow the wind buffeted her fur. The branches of the trees above the hollow were thrashing to and fro, and leaves were whirling down into the camp. A dark weight of dread was growing in Sunbeam’s belly as she envisaged the storm sweeping across the hills. What would happen to cats who didn’t have the shelter of a Clan? What would happen to her family?

Come on, she scolded herself. *There’s work to be done.*

Pushing aside her fears, she headed back to the fresh-kill pile, but before she reached it, she spotted Nightheart struggling to drag a branch through the thorn tunnel and into the camp.

“Here, let me help,” she meowed as she skidded up to him. “Where do you want that to go?”

“Ivypool told us to shore up the dens,” Nightheart replied, giving her ear a brief nuzzle. “A few branches should block off the worst of the wind. Let’s do the elders first.”

As Sunbeam helped Nightheart drag the branch across the camp, she became aware that his gaze was fixed on her. “Are you scared?” he asked.

Sunbeam paused for a moment, then nodded. *I can’t hide anything from Nightheart.* “I am,” she admitted, “but not for myself, or for any cat in ThunderClan. We all have one another, and we’ll see each other through. But my kin are out there somewhere, and they don’t have a Clan to protect them.” Her eyes were filled with anxiety. “I can’t help fearing the worst.”

Chapter 16

Frostpaw bounded along the lakeshore, glad that she had taken the chance to head out of shelter during the lull in the storm. Yet even though the rain had eased off and the wind had dropped, now and again icy gusts pummeled her, probing deep into her pelt and sending shivers through her body.

But it could be worse, she thought, determination giving speed to her paws.

Finally, Frostpaw reached the place where the WindClan border stream flowed out into the lake. She headed away from the shore, looking for a place where the stream narrowed enough for her to leap across, but as she brushed her way through chilly clumps of long grass she picked up fresh WindClan scent. She looked up to see Appleshine and Woodsong standing on the far bank, watching her approach.

“Greetings.” Appleshine’s voice was as cold as the wind. “What do you want?”

Frostpaw halted opposite the two she-cats and dipped her head politely. “Greetings,” she gasped, fighting for breath after her desperate dash along the lakeshore. “I need to speak with Harestar and Kestrelflight right away.”

Both she-cats let out hisses of amusement, rolling their eyes at each other.

“Who do you think you are, demanding a meeting with our leader?” Woodsong growled. “You’re not even a medicine cat anymore, from what I hear.”

Frostpaw suppressed a sigh. *I don’t have time to argue with these cats.* “I don’t care what you think about me,” she declared. “I’ve come to give you a serious warning.”

“Ooh, ‘serious’!” Appleshine sneered. “I’m shaking in my fur!”

Woodsong gazed at Frostpaw with narrowed eyes. “You might as well tell us what this serious warning is,” she told Frostpaw. “Because if you don’t, you’re not setting paw onto our territory.”

Frostpaw flexed her claws in frustration, then forced herself to be calm. She needed the cooperation of these cats. “Fine!” she

meowed. “I had a vision about this storm,” she continued. “It’s going to be bad, and I think your nursery might be in danger from a tree branch or something.”

For a heartbeat the two WindClan cats stared at each other in silence, then turned a baffled gaze on Frostpaw.

At last Woodsong gave a dismissive flick of her tail. “We all know your visions aren’t real,” she responded. “You even said that yourself, remember?”

“Besides, just look across the moor.” Appleshine turned and angled her ears to where the forest thinned out and the swell of the moor was visible. “Our camp is up there on the hill. Can you see any trees there? No, that’s right, you can’t, because there aren’t any.”

Woodsong nodded agreement. “No trees near the nursery,” she confirmed. “Frostpaw, you need to stop letting your imagination run away with you. Now go away and mind your own business.”

The patronizing kindness in her tone infuriated Frostpaw. *Like I’m some stupid kit!* She paid no attention to the brown she-cat’s order. “This is serious,” she insisted. “If you won’t allow me into your camp, you have to bring Kestrelflight here so I can share my message with him.”

“We don’t *have* to do anything,” Appleshine snapped. “Who do you think you are, our Clan leader?”

“Yeah, you’ve no right to come here issuing orders,” Woodsong agreed. “Now scram, or we’ll come over there and make you.”

“On ThunderClan territory?” Frostpaw gazed at the two she-cats unflinchingly. “I’m sure Squirrelstar would be really interested to hear about that.”

“You wouldn’t dare tell Squirrelstar.” For a moment Appleshine sounded suddenly less certain. Then she straightened up, her shoulder fur bristling. “You’re trespassing in ThunderClan too,” she snarled.

“I’m a medicine cat,” Frostpaw retorted. “I can go where I like, as long as I have a good reason. Listen,” she went on more urgently, aware of darker clouds massing overhead. “When your nursery is destroyed and your kits killed or injured, do you want to be the cats who have to admit that you knew about it beforehand but you didn’t pass the message on?”

Woodsong rolled her eyes. “That’s not going to happen.”

She looked at her Clanmate for agreement, but Frostpaw could see that the other WindClan cat’s gaze was darting here and there, her muzzle clenched with tension.

“But it *might* happen,” Appleshine muttered, sounding reluctant to admit that Frostpaw might be right. “I’d better go and report. You stay here and guard her. As for you,” she added to Frostpaw, “when Kestrelflight tells you to go away, you’d better do it—right away.”

She turned away and bounded through the trees. Frostpaw caught a glimpse of her golden tabby figure racing up the hillside until a swell of moorland hid her from view.

“You’re in big trouble now,” Woodsong growled. “You’ve fetched Kestrelflight out of camp, and when nothing happens, he’s not going to be pleased.”

“When the tree branch falls on the nursery, I’m not the cat who’ll be in trouble,” Frostpaw snapped.

She waited, stamping her paws on the ground in an effort to keep warm, aware all the time of Woodsong’s unfriendly stare. After what felt like a whole moon, she spotted Appleshine returning, pelting down the hill with Kestrelflight hard on her paws.

The WindClan medicine cat halted on the bank of the stream, breathing hard, and faced Frostpaw, his expression a mixture of anger and confusion. “What’s all this about?” he demanded. “Coming here is wasting valuable time I could be using to prepare for the storm.”

“Frostpaw told us that a tree will damage the nursery,” Woodsong reported. “But it sounds like some desperate ruse to manipulate our Clan. Her own Clan doesn’t want her around anymore, so she’s probably trying to convince one of the other Clans that they need her.”

“I’ll make my own mind up about that, thank you,” Kestrelflight snapped. He fixed Frostpaw with a glare that seemed to see right through her. “How do you know about the nursery being in danger?” he asked.

“I saw it in a vision,” Frostpaw admitted reluctantly. “I saw a shadow fall across the nursery. I know that I couldn’t trust my visions

in the past, but I can tell the difference now, and *this* one is true. I'm sure of it!"

Kestrelflight tilted his head to one side, considering what Frostpaw had told him. "I'm still not convinced that you are having real visions," he meowed, "but kits are our most vulnerable Clanmates, and any threat to them has to be taken seriously."

"So you will do something?" Frostpaw asked hopefully. "You have newborn kits in there."

Kestrelflight let out a snort. "I can't understand how a tree could threaten the nursery in the WindClan camp," he responded. "That isn't possible, but just on the off chance that the tree you saw represents some other kind of threat, Frostpaw, we will post cats outside the nursery—they will protect the kits as well as they can. If you're wrong, we've lost nothing," he added with a glance at Woodsong.

"Now shove off," Woodsong snarled at Frostpaw, before she and Appleshine stalked away upstream, continuing their patrol.

Frostpaw couldn't help casting an irritated glare at the two WindClan she-cats as she watched them until they were out of sight. *I'm just trying to help your Clan!* She let out a discouraged sigh, wondering why everything about being a medicine cat felt so utterly thankless.

"If there's nothing else, Frostpaw, you should be going." Kestrelflight spoke more politely than his Clanmates, but there was no warmth or friendliness in his tone. "I'll see that WindClan's kits are kept safe," he went on. "And you will want to take shelter too, if the storm is going to be as bad as you say."

It sounded to Frostpaw as though the WindClan tom didn't actually believe her, and just wanted to get rid of her as quickly as possible. She wanted to ask about Whistlepaw, and whether her friend was still in trouble for helping her, but regretfully she realized that questioning Kestrelflight would only irritate him more.

"I'll do that, Kestrelflight," she agreed resignedly. "Good luck, and may StarClan light your path."

Turning, she headed downstream and then bounded along the lakeshore, eager to return to ShadowClan. But she was still on ThunderClan territory when darker clouds massed over her head

and a bitter, cold rain began to fall. The wind howled like a whole Clan of battling cats, whipping the rain sideways so that it pelted Frostpaw's cheek, stinging like burning embers. Dread enveloped her like a freezing fog as she realized she would never make it back to the ShadowClan camp before the storm unleashed its full force.

Struggling with panic, Frostpaw turned in every direction, wondering where she could go to shelter. *Back to WindClan? No—they would never welcome me.*

The ThunderClan camp was closest. Frostpaw hoped that if she hurried, she could tell the ThunderClan cats about the warning she had tried to give WindClan. Maybe they would even be willing to offer help to WindClan—help that Frostpaw was sure the WindClan cats were going to need.

And maybe I won't have to face the storm alone.

Chapter 17

“Your eyes are glowing like amber flames,” Sunbeam told Nightheart. “If it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t be able to see you at all.”

Nightheart huffed with amusement as he and Sunbeam swiftly dragged branches into place to shore up the elders’ den. When they had started, the sky had been a somber gray, but as darker clouds massed above their heads, the camp was plunged into a darkness so deep, it seemed like a night with neither moon nor stars. In that new darkness, Nightheart knew his pelt blended into his surroundings.

“Your eyes are so brilliant,” Sunbeam went on. “They look as if they’re moving on their own, like fireflies.”

Nightheart would have been flattered by her words if he hadn’t realized that she was babbling out of a need to suppress her own growing fear. All around them, their Clanmates were scrambling to protect the camp. Warriors were strengthening the barrier of thorns and brambles that marked the entrance. Wafflepaw and the other apprentices had been given the task of stashing the prey from the fresh-kill pile, stuffing it deep into a cleft in the rock and packing it with clumps of grass.

“It looks like the wind will be the biggest threat,” Nightheart meowed, shivering as an icy gust buffeted his fur. “But if there’s a flood, there’s a way we can escape up the side of the hollow.”

Sunbeam gazed uneasily up at the sheer cliff face. “Really?”

“Yes, really,” Nightheart reassured her. “In the Great Storm, the water rose so high that they had to evacuate the camp, and that’s the way they went. When this storm is over, you should ask Brambleclaw to tell you the whole story.”

He hauled up another branch, but the wind caught it, almost knocking him over. The barrier he and Sunbeam had built began to look like nothing more than a pile of twigs.

“This won’t do,” Nightheart meowed. “The first real blast of wind will scatter the branches all over the camp. We need bramble tendrils and ivy to weave between them.”

Sunbeam nodded, though she looked doubtful. “Do we have time for that?” she asked.

“We do, but we need help.” Glancing around, Nightheart saw that the apprentices had finished stashing the prey, and beckoned them over with a wave of his tail.

“We need bramble tendrils,” he explained. “As much as we can gather. Follow me, all of you.”

Away from the shelter of the stone hollow, the rising wind plastered the cats’ fur to their bodies and made their eyes water. The apprentices were almost knocked off their paws. Fighting the force of it, Nightheart ducked his head and struggled to keep his pads on the ground. Paw step by paw step he led the apprentices to a thicket.

“Wafflepaw, Bristlepaw, you’re with me,” he directed, halting beside the tree. “Sunbeam, take Graypaw and Stempaw and find a bramble thicket. Quick as you can.”

“I’m on it,” Sunbeam responded, and led the two apprentices away.

Nightheart dug his claws into the thicket and began breaking off tendrils. Bristlepaw and Wafflepaw copied him, and soon they had a big pile of tendrils heaped on the forest floor.

“We’d better take these back.” Nightheart huffed out a breath; in spite of the cold wind, he was warm from the hard work. “Then we’ll see how much more we need.”

Dragging the tendrils back to the stone hollow took so long that Nightheart was afraid the worst of the storm would hit before they were ready for it. The tendrils got in his face so that he couldn’t see where he was going. Bristlepaw let out a screech as she tripped over the stem she was struggling with and landed hard against a tree stump.

“Are you okay?” Nightheart asked.

“Fine!” Bristlepaw gasped, and stumbled on, her jaw set with determination.

At last they reached the camp and got to work weaving the tendrils into the barrier of branches outside the elders’ den.

“This will be really strong,” Wafflepaw panted, batting a stem into place. His fur was sticking up in all directions, but his eyes were gleaming with satisfaction.

Nightheart and the apprentices were still weaving in the tendrils when Sunbeam returned with Graypaw and Stempaw, dragging more enormous bundles.

“I’ve got so many thorns in my fur,” Graypaw panted as he let his bundle drop, “I think I’ll go and be a hedgehog.”

“You do that.” Stempaw gave his brother a friendly nudge. “I’ll find you a nice worm to eat.”

“Yuck!”

“This is great!” Nightheart exclaimed, turning over the nearest tendrils. “Now I’m sure we’ll have enough.”

“We’d better,” Sunbeam responded, shaking a bramble stem off her shoulder. “The wind is so strong out there; I don’t think we should go out again.”

“Then let’s get this barrier finished.”

With Sunbeam and all the apprentices to help, it wasn’t long before the last of the bramble was in place, binding the branches together.

“I think that’s the best we can do,” Nightheart commented.

There was a rustling sound as Brackenfur poked his nose out of the den. “Good job,” he meowed. “I couldn’t have done better myself.”

While he was speaking, Nightheart saw Squirrelstar appear on the Highledge, survey the camp, then run down the tumbled rocks to the ground. “Okay,” she yowled, raising her voice to carry above the blustering wind. “Every cat into their den! And stay there until I tell you to come out.”

Nightheart and Sunbeam both headed for the warriors’ den, but before they reached it, Nightheart spotted movement at the mouth of the thorn tunnel. Bayshine emerged into the camp; Nightheart drew in a shocked breath as he saw Frostpaw following him. Finleap brought up the rear.

All three cats bounded across the camp to stand in front of Squirrelstar. The cats who were still out in the clearing gathered around to listen, letting out murmurs of curiosity. Ivypool padded up to her leader’s side, with Sparkpelt and Finchlight a paw step behind. The two medicine cats appeared from their den and drew closer; Alderheart’s ears flicked up anxiously as he spotted Frostpaw.

Nightheart exchanged a glance with Sunbeam. “What’s all this about?” he wondered, heading toward the group. “Frostpaw wouldn’t be here if it weren’t important.”

“Frostpaw?” As the young medicine cat halted in front of her, Squirrelstar blinked, startled. “Why are you here? Can’t you see there’s a storm bearing down on us?”

“We found her heading this way when we were coming back from patrol,” Bayshine explained.

“It’s because of the storm that I’m here, Squirrelstar,” Frostpaw replied with a respectful dip of her head. “I had a vision about WindClan—I saw a dark shadow fall over their nursery, and I know that a tree will fall on it.”

A baffled silence greeted Frostpaw’s words, until Sparkpelt gave voice to what every cat was thinking.

“A tree—on WindClan territory?” she murmured.

“Yes, I know it’s unlikely,” Frostpaw responded. “But that was my vision.”

“Then why are you here, instead of going to warn WindClan?” Ivypool asked.

To Nightheart’s surprise, Frostpaw’s shoulder fur began to rise as if she was suppressing anger. “I did go to WindClan,” she meowed. “The patrolling cats were very hostile, and it took a long time before I could convince them to fetch Kestrelflight. I told him about my vision, but I don’t think he believed me. He said he would have a couple of cats guard the nursery, but what good will that do if a tree falls? It would just crush the guards as well as the kits!” Her tone became pleading. “Squirrelstar, WindClan is going to need our help. I’m sure of it!”

Alderheart looked up, his eyes alert. “Why is that?” he asked.

“There will be a fallen tree and injured kits,” Frostpaw replied.

“You mean nothing has actually happened?” Jayfeather scoffed. “Frostpaw, just calm down. StarClan has a habit of sending messages that could be interpreted in more than one way. Your vision could just as easily mean that WindClan gets into a squabble with that weird SkyClan mediator, Tree.”

“I know what my vision meant,” Frostpaw insisted, facing up to the blind medicine cat without flinching at his scathing tone.

“Squirrelstar,” she continued, turning back to the Clan leader, “there will be a fallen tree in WindClan. They’re going to need extra medicine cats to tend the injured, and strong warriors to help them move the tree.”

“I don’t mind trying to help,” Nightheart declared.

“It’s a big risk to take,” Jayfeather objected, “sending cats out into a storm. And Frostpaw is still new to interpreting her visions.”

“I trust Frostpaw,” Nightheart meowed. “I’ve just come back from a long journey with her, and I know her heart. She’s a good cat, and it’s not her fault that she’s without a Clan right now. She’s clearly trying to help.” He drew himself up, trying to sound strong and decisive. “I’ll go with her, and do my best to move the tree, if there is one to be moved. If there isn’t . . .” He shrugged. “Then there’s no harm done.”

Catching Sunbeam’s gaze, he saw how she was looking at him with overwhelming pride and happiness. “I’ll go too,” she offered immediately.

Briefly Nightheart touched his nose to her ear. *It feels so good to be facing a challenge together for once!*

Squirrelstar still looked doubtful. “I suppose we’re as well prepared for the storm as we’re going to be,” she murmured, half to herself. “And it looks as if we still have time before it hits full force.” She paused, then nodded decisively. “The two of you may go,” she told Nightheart and Sunbeam.

“Thank you so much, Squirrelstar!” Frostpaw exclaimed. “And thank you, too,” she added to the two cats who would go with her. “I’ll never forget this.”

“There’ll be a chance for thank-yous later,” Nightheart pointed out. “If we’re short of time, we’d better get going. We have a tree to move.”

Chapter 18

As she followed Nightheart out of the camp, Sunbeam felt her whole body glowing. She was so proud of the way Nightheart had offered to help that she could burst. She had felt such frustration at being in the same Clan as Nightheart but hardly ever being able to spend time with him. Now at last they were heading out on a mission together.

But as the three cats made their way through the forest, Sunbeam grew less certain that any of them should have come on this quest. In the thick of the storm, what was usually an easy journey to WindClan was proving more difficult than any cat could have imagined. Even under the trees the strong winds blew twigs and rocks in their path, whirling up dust and debris that stung their eyes.

A rumble of thunder sounded; it was far distant, over the lake beyond RiverClan. But Sunbeam hardly had time to draw a breath before it rolled out again, closer this time and louder. She suppressed a shiver of dread, concentrating on putting one paw in front of another, head down against the wind.

All the while rain had been falling, whipped over the cats in gusts of wind. Now it seemed as though the sky opened, releasing torrents that soaked their pelts within heartbeats. The forest floor turned into mud. The cats had to force their way through sodden grass and undergrowth, their path obscured by the solid screen of rain.

“Stay close,” Nightheart warned the others. “The last thing we need is for any cat to get lost along the way.”

Sunbeam couldn’t pick up any WindClan scent as they leaped the border stream; the rain had washed it away. She hoped that all the WindClan cats were safely in their camp.

Is Frostpaw right that they’re in serious danger?

As they broke out of the woodland and began to race up the moorland slope, a claw of lightning crackled across the sky, followed by a boom of thunder so loud that Sunbeam felt it rumble through all her bones. At the same moment she noticed a single stunted tree on the horizon above the WindClan camp, its twisted branches dark

against the stormy sky. Almost as if she were a medicine cat, she could see what was going to happen.

Oh, StarClan, no!

The roll of thunder had hardly died away when another jagged bolt of lightning slashed like a claw along the dark clouds. Sunbeam watched in horror as it hit the tree, blazing through the trunk to the ground. Half of the tree sheared off and was caught by the wind, tumbling over and over as it soared into the sky.

“No!” Frostpaw shrieked.

Thunder pealed out again as the medicine cat took off for the WindClan camp, hurling herself up the hill without waiting for the rest of the patrol. Sunbeam and Nightheart followed hard on her paws.

They were still pelting upward when the flying tree hurtled to the ground, right on top of the WindClan camp; Sunbeam heard the crash and the sound of wood splintering as it split apart.

“We’re too late!” Frostpaw yowled.

She vanished over the lip of the hollow where WindClan had their camp. Sunbeam and Nightheart followed, but as she caught sight of the devastation, Sunbeam had to pause for a heartbeat, gazing in horror at the scene in front of her.

The tree had thumped down near the center of the camp, jamming itself into what had been the nursery. A crowd of cats was swarming around it, but the tangle of branches blocked every possible way to get in.

Some of the WindClan warriors—Sunbeam recognized Hootwhisker and Nightcloud—were attacking the tree, tugging at the outer branches in a desperate attempt to break them off. But it was a massive task, and Sunbeam realized that any injured kits might well die before the rescuers could reach them.

Frostpaw was right, Sunbeam thought despairingly. *We are too late!*

At the center of the chaos, one cat was wildly clawing at the branches. “Leafkit! Leafkit!” she yowled frantically. Sunbeam recognized the gray tabby pelt of Whistlepaw, Kestrelflight’s medicine-cat apprentice.

Frostpaw was already racing up to the nursery. Sunbeam followed, Nightheart pelting along at her shoulder.

As Sunbeam approached, she spotted Kestrelflight perched on one of the outer branches. “Whistlepaw, come out of there,” he pleaded. “You’re only hurting yourself more.”

Frostpaw skidded to a halt in front of him. “We’re here to help!” she panted.

Kestrelflight turned to her, his expression a mixture of apology and gratitude. “You were right, Frostpaw,” he mewed. “I shouldn’t have—”

“Never mind that,” Frostpaw interrupted. “Were all the kits in the nursery when the tree struck?”

Kestrelflight shook his head. “No, thank StarClan,” he replied. “The closer the thunder got, the more we started to believe your warning. We were able to move the kits out of the nursery in time—all except one. Leafkit is one of Featherpelt and Oatclaw’s litter. We were just about to move her out when the tree crashed down into the camp and we had to leap out of the way.”

Gazing at the tangle of branches wedged into the devastated nursery, Sunbeam had to choke back a wail of grief. She couldn’t imagine how the one remaining kit could have survived.

“Is she dead?” Frostpaw asked tensely, echoing Sunbeam’s own thought.

The heartbeat’s pause before Kestrelflight replied seemed to stretch out for moons.

“I don’t know,” Kestrelflight meowed at last. “We could hear her mewing at first, but now she’s gone quiet. And we can’t reach her to find out.”

Sunbeam’s belly roiled with anxiety; she wanted to hurl herself at the tree and thrust her way through to rescue the kit. But she forced herself to stay calm, to listen to the others and offer herself to help in any way she could.

She spotted Featherpelt crouching nearby; two kits were huddling into the curve of her belly while she covered them with frantic licks.

Their father, Oatclaw, was clambering up into the tree, meowing desperately to his trapped kit. “Leafkit, speak to us!” he begged. “It’ll be okay. We’re going to get you out.”

Frostpaw gave a brisk nod. “We have to get Leafkit to safety,” she declared; Sunbeam was amazed at the note of authority in her voice.

“But first we need to get Whistlepaw out of there.”

Sunbeam watched, her heart thumping in her throat as Frostpaw began to climb into the splintered remnants of the tree, making for Whistlepaw. When she reached her, she rested a paw on her shoulder. “You have to come out,” she mewed gently.

“No! No, I can’t!” Whistlepaw responded, her tone frantic. “I have to rescue Leafkit. She’s my sister!”

“We all want that,” Frostpaw soothed her. “But you can’t do it alone. Come down, and then we can work out the best way to tackle this.”

Whistlepaw went on protesting for a few moments longer, but Sunbeam could see she was tangled deep among the branches and she wasn’t making any more progress toward the trapped kit. Finally she gasped out, “Okay,” and started edging backward out of the twisted remains of the tree.

Frostpaw bent the twigs aside as well as she could to make it easier for Whistlepaw to free herself, but the young medicine cat was shaking, her paws slipping as she tried to maneuver into the open. Crowfeather and Heathertail leaped up to help, supporting Whistlepaw until she stood safely on the ground.

When Whistlepaw was freed from the tree, Sunbeam could see that she was more severely injured than any cat had realized. Blood was welling from a deep puncture wound in her side. Tufts of fur were missing from all over her body, and she was covered with bleeding scratches that made her pelt damp and red. She was standing on three legs, too, with one forepaw raised, as if it was injured.

“To our den with you,” Kestrelflight meowed. “No arguments. Can some cat help her?”

He led the way to the medicine-cat den—thankfully, the tree had missed it when it had crashed down—while Crowfeather and Heathertail helped Whistlepaw along, supporting her on either side.

Harestar and a couple of other WindClan warriors were continuing to force a way through the interlacing branches to reach the trapped kit. Nightheart and Sunbeam joined them, balancing on the outer trunk in spite of the blustering wind that threatened to send

them flying, and the driving rain that made every paw hold slippery and waterlogged their fur so that it was harder to move.

Sunbeam wondered how long she could keep going, swiping at branches or biting off twigs with her teeth. She was growing more and more exhausted; every single movement she made was an effort. Yet seeing Nightheart working beside her gave her the courage she needed.

“I think we’re getting there,” she gasped.

Nightheart nodded. “It won’t be long now.” His tone was cheerful; Sunbeam guessed that he was trying to sound more optimistic than he felt.

Eventually, after what seemed like a whole moon of struggling, Sunbeam and Nightheart managed to open up a tiny crevice leading deep into the center of the tree.

“There’s just about enough room for a cat to get in there,” Nightheart muttered, beginning to thrust himself into the gap.

“No, wait.” Sunbeam stretched out a paw to stop him. “You’re broader in the shoulders than I am. It’ll be easier for me to get in. I’ll do it.”

Nightheart gave her a worried glance, then nodded in acceptance. “You’re right, Sunbeam,” he mewed. “But for StarClan’s sake, please be careful.”

He and Harestar pulled back the surrounding branches while Sunbeam eased herself through the gap. At once the battering of the storm died away. She was in a narrow tunnel leading through the wreckage of the tree and into the gorse bush that had sheltered the nursery. She let out a hiss of pain as thorns caught at her fur and pricked her paws.

Ahead she could see nothing through the gloom of the storm and the encircling branches. “Leafkit? Leafkit?” she called out. “Can you hear me?”

Massive relief flooded over her as a faint whimper answered her. *She’s still alive!* Bracing herself, she followed the sound into darkness.

Soon the thorns under her paws gave way to the soft moss and bracken covering the nursery floor. A weak ray of light filtered through a gap in the tangled ruins of the tree and showed her Leafkit

cowering in a corner, pinned at the far side of the nursery by a branch that looked like a claw.

“Don’t cry,” Sunbeam reassured her. “I’m Sunbeam, I’m a friend, and I’m coming to get you and bring you to your mother. Everything will be fine.”

Leafkit watched her with huge, scared eyes while Sunbeam bit off the twigs that imprisoned her. She was very small, mostly white with some dark gray spots on her flank and one ear; Sunbeam guessed her eyes had not been open for long.

Finally Sunbeam made a hole that was big enough for her to stretch her neck past the branches and pick up Leafkit by her scruff. “Keep still,” she warned the kit before her jaws closed on soft fur. “We’ll be out of here in a few heartbeats, and I’m sure Featherpelt will be so relieved to see you! Just think of the story you can tell your littermates!”

After lifting the kit, Sunbeam managed to turn around in the wreck of the nursery so that she could clamber forward. Careful not to let the kit scrape against the branches, she struggled out into the open and down to the floor of the camp, where Harestar and the kit’s parents were waiting.

“There!” she mewed, setting the kit down in front of Featherpelt; Leafkit hurled herself at her mother, burrowing into her fur with tiny squeaks. “I think she was frightened, but she’ll be okay.”

Featherpelt gave her a look filled with gratitude before she began licking Leafkit all over, searching her fur for any injuries. “Just a scratch or two,” she reported at last. “Oh, it’s all right, my darling kit; you’re safe now. Thank you so much, Sunbeam! You were so brave.”

Sunbeam shrugged and gave her chest fur a couple of embarrassed licks. “Any warrior could have done it,” she responded.

“Don’t be so modest,” Harestar put in. He turned to Featherpelt. “But you’d better have Kestrelflight look at her.”

“We’ll go to his den right now,” Featherpelt mewed, setting off, carrying Leafkit by the scruff, while the other two kits trotted along beside Oatclaw.

“Hang on a moment,” Nightheart meowed as Sunbeam was about to follow. “Let’s check you over, too. I was worried about you.”

He sniffed her all over, licking her fur here and there as Featherpelt had licked her kit. Sunbeam felt warm with affection. *He really cares about me.*

When Nightheart had satisfied himself that Sunbeam wasn't hurt, they headed to the medicine cats' den. They arrived to find Kestrelflight examining Leafkit. Farther back in the den, Sunbeam was dismayed to see that Whistlepaw was lying unconscious in a nest of moss and bracken. Frostpaw was bending over her, her eyes wide with concern.

Sunbeam had been feeling relieved since Leafkit's rescue, but now she felt a new tremor of anxiety in her belly as she looked at the limp form of the medicine-cat apprentice. *I didn't realize it was that bad!* "How is Whistlepaw?" she asked urgently.

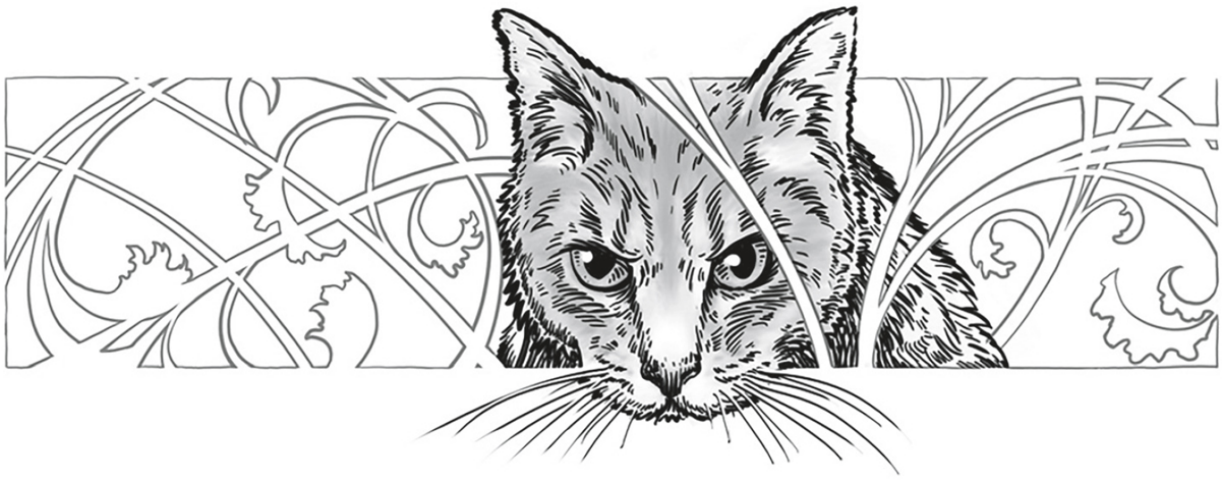
Kestrelflight looked up from his examination of Leafkit. His eyes were stricken. "Whistlepaw is badly hurt," he replied. Sunbeam could tell he was struggling to keep his voice steady. "We're doing everything we can. I think she'll be all right, but none of this would have happened if I'd listened to Frostpaw the moment she showed up at our border. Frostpaw, I'm so sorry that I didn't."

Frostpaw padded forward from where she had been sitting beside Whistlepaw. "It's okay," she mewed. "I understand why you doubted me. The important thing is that we were able to save all the kits."

Kestrelflight's eyes were full of sincerity as he gazed at Frostpaw. "I will never doubt you again," he promised.

Relief and exhaustion made Sunbeam unsteady on her paws, though she felt warmth growing inside her to see Frostpaw being properly valued at last.

She leaned against Nightheart's shoulder. "We did it," she murmured. "Thank StarClan, we really did it."



Chapter 19

Savoring the sharp, clean taste of marigold, Frostpaw chewed the herbs into a poultice to apply to Whistlepaw's wounds. The WindClan apprentice had regained consciousness, and the only injury that was worrying Frostpaw was the deep gash in her side.

Her mind and body felt exhausted from the frantic dash across the moor and the rescue of Leafkit, yet she was filled with a deep satisfaction that the WindClan kits had all survived.

"You're lucky to be alive," she told Whistlepaw as she patted the last of the marigold into the wound and reached for a pawful of cobweb to hold it in place. "You pushed yourself hard to save your siblings. It was a noble act, but you have to think of your own safety, too."

"I know," Whistlepaw sighed. "But I could not have lived with myself if Leafkit had been hurt. My parents would have been devastated—not to mention, those kits are WindClan's future."

Frostpaw nodded understanding and gave her friend a comforting lick around her ears. "You're a brave cat. I never had the chance to apologize to you for all the trouble you got into with your Clan," she meowed. "It was all because you wanted to help me, and I can never thank you enough for what you did."

"It was nothing," Whistlepaw muttered.

"It was *everything*," Frostpaw insisted, her voice shaking at the memory of how she had lain helpless on the moor, feeling her life slowly draining away. "Without you, I would have died, and no cat would ever have known the truth about Splashtail." She let out a sigh of frustration. "I just wish I could have convinced every cat, so that your sacrifice would have been worth it."

"It *was* worth it," Whistlepaw mewed gently. "*I* know the truth—even if my Clanmates don't believe me."

A shadow fell across the entrance to the den as Kestrelflight stepped in, a bundle of herbs in his jaws. He cast an awkward glance at the two she-cats; obviously he had overheard what they were saying. He dropped his bundle beside the herb store and turned to face them.

“If today’s disaster has taught us anything,” he began, “it’s that nothing is certain—not even things that seem undeniable.” His gaze fixed seriously on Whistlepaw, he continued, “There’s more to the story of how and why you helped Frostpaw than I understood. And,” he added, turning to Frostpaw, “there’s more to you than I chose to believe. I am sorry.”

Frostpaw ducked her head in gratitude. She wasn’t sure what to say in response; she was touched by what the medicine cat had said, but it was Harestar who needed to believe her if there was any hope of the other Clans helping RiverClan get rid of Splashtail. At least it sounded as if Whistlepaw wouldn’t be punished any longer for having helped her.

As if her thought had called him up, the WindClan leader poked his head inside the medicine cats’ den. “Frostpaw, I need to speak to you in private,” he meowed.

“You go, Frostpaw,” Kestrelflight told her with a nod. “You’ve done well in treating Whistlepaw, but I can take it from here.”

Frostpaw murmured goodbye to the two medicine cats and followed Harestar out into the camp. While she had been inside the den, the storm had blown itself out. The rain had stopped, the wind had become a soft breeze, and the sun shone from a cloudless blue sky.

WindClan cats were swarming over the fallen tree, clearing away the broken twigs and debris.

“We won’t even try to move the tree,” Harestar remarked. “If we break off the branches to make a proper entrance, and pack what’s left with brambles and bracken, we can make the nursery even better than it was before.”

He led Frostpaw across the camp and leaped up onto a boulder, beckoning for her to join him. From the top of the boulder Frostpaw could see across WindClan’s territory, all the way down to the lake. And across the water, dim and misty with distance, was the lakeshore of RiverClan territory.

In spite of all the time Frostpaw had spent away from her Clan, something stirred inside her: something that was a mixture of joy and pain. *Home.* She knew that she had to believe that one day she would live there again, and set right what Splashtail had destroyed.

“Everything has happened just as you said it would,” Harestar began once he and Frostpaw were settled on the boulder. “A tree really did fall on the nursery. Whistlepaw was injured, but if you hadn’t warned us, the losses would have been much worse. Our whole Clan would have been heartbroken.”

“I was happy to do what I could,” Frostpaw murmured.

“That storm was unusually strong.” Harestar sounded thoughtful. “And it’s even more unusual for a tree to threaten anything in our camp.” He gestured with his tail to take in the bleak moorland, where hardly any trees disturbed the sweep of tough grass with the occasional clump of gorse or bracken. “There’s only one explanation,” the WindClan leader continued, deeply serious now. “Your vision was real, Frostpaw, and sent by StarClan.”

Frostpaw couldn’t find the words to reply; she could only nod in acknowledgment.

“I’ve never heard of a cat receiving only one true vision,” Harestar went on. “If this vision was real . . . it must stand to reason that your other visions were real as well. And so I owe you an apology. I believe now that you *were* telling the truth at the Gathering before last, when you told the Clans that Splashtail killed Reedwhisker, and that he also tried to kill you.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Frostpaw found it was difficult to keep her voice even; Harestar’s change of heart was so momentous. “But what are you going to do about it?”

Harestar shifted uneasily, as if the stone where he sat had suddenly become too cold, or too jagged, for comfort. “All that has happened recently has shown how stupid it is for one Clan to try controlling another Clan’s private decisions. When Tigerstar took over RiverClan . . .”

“Yes, that was wrong,” Frostpaw put in.

“So, any movement for change must start inside RiverClan,” Harestar continued. “But if the cats of RiverClan decide to resist Splashtail’s leadership and need outside help to drive him out, WindClan will join with the others.”

A rush of relief surged through Frostpaw. “Thank you, Harestar!” she exclaimed.

“Don’t thank me—not yet,” Harestar meowed. “It takes time for a Clan to lose faith in its leader, and I don’t think any Clan has ever been without true leadership for as long as RiverClan has been now. Mistystar’s death, and then Reedwhisker’s death so soon afterward, left no obvious cat to succeed to the leadership. And then for a while they were under the control of ShadowClan. . . . Cats will cling to the belief that Splashtail will revive their Clan, because that is what they’ve wanted for so long. It’s hard to reject that which you have dreamed of.”

Harestar’s words reminded Frostpaw of her own past; when she was a kit, she had believed that she would be RiverClan’s medicine cat and live a peaceful life. *It hasn’t been all that peaceful so far!*

“That’s true,” she agreed. “But I have faith in my Clanmates.”

“As you must,” Harestar responded with a gentle nod.

Glancing around the camp, Frostpaw spotted Nightheart heading toward her, followed by Sunbeam. “It’s time to be going home,” Nightheart meowed.

Frostpaw realized that the sun was going down. She could hardly believe that the storm, the rescue of Leafkit, and her talks with Kestrelflight and Harestar had all taken place within one day. It seemed more like a whole moon since she had left the ShadowClan camp.

“You’re right,” she told Nightheart, sliding down from the boulder and staggering on weary paws. “I’m sure Tigerstar, Puddleshine, and Shadowsight must be wondering where I am, even though I’m not their Clanmate. I’d better be heading back.”

Harestar leaped down to stand at Frostpaw’s side. “I can’t thank you all enough,” he declared. “WindClan will never forget what you did today.”

“And *we* want to thank you, too.” Frostpaw turned to see that Featherpelt had padded up to join them, with her mate, Oatclaw, at her side. “Our whole litter might have died, and Whistlepaw too, were it not for you,” the gray tabby she-cat mewed. “You saved our kits. We owe you a huge debt.”

Frostpaw dipped her head in acknowledgment. “I’m just glad that I could help,” she murmured.

With Nightheart in the lead, the cats left the camp and headed down the hill toward ThunderClan territory, the setting sun throwing their shadows ahead of them, long and wavering. The ThunderClan cats were joking with each other and reliving the crisis in the WindClan camp, but Frostpaw paced along in silence. Her gaze was fixed on the horizon, and RiverClan's territory across the lake.

She longed to be home once more, to feel her paws treading on familiar, beloved ground. She could only hope that Duskfur, Icewing, and Mothwing were reminding her Clanmates of what it meant to be a true RiverClan cat.

Chapter 20

“So . . . here we are, waiting,” Nightheart sighed.

Sunbeam looked up from the thrush they were sharing, outside the warriors’ den on a clear, fine morning. “I know it’s hard,” she responded. “But Squirrelstar is right.”

When they had returned home after the storm the night before, they had found Squirrelstar watching for them. “Come up to my den,” she’d ordered, “and tell me what happened.”

Nightheart and Sunbeam had followed their Clan leader up to the Highledge. With Squirrelstar listening intently, her green gaze flicking from one to the other, they had told her how the tree had fallen on the WindClan nursery, and how Sunbeam had ventured inside to rescue the one remaining kit.

“Whistlepaw was the only cat to be seriously injured,” Nightheart had finished. “And even her injuries are under control.”

Squirrelstar had nodded. “That’s good news.”

“But there’s even better news,” Nightheart had continued. “After Frostpaw’s vision was proved to be true, Harestar changed his mind. Now he believes that she is a real medicine cat, receiving real messages from StarClan.”

“And he says that he will help us and ShadowClan remove Splashtail,” Sunbeam had added, her whiskers quivering with excitement, “but only if RiverClan turns against him first.”

Squirrelstar’s eyes had widened and seemed to glow in the moonlight that shone through the entrance to the den. “That’s better news than I’ve heard for moons,” she had declared.

“So what do we do next?” Nightheart had asked eagerly.

“Now . . . we wait,” Squirrelstar had sighed.

Nightheart had exchanged a glance with Sunbeam; he had felt so optimistic on their return from WindClan, imagining the allied Clans sweeping into RiverClan territory and driving out the false leader. Now his optimism was draining away. *Of course it isn’t going to be as easy as that.*

“Couldn’t we visit SkyClan again?” he had asked. “Maybe Leafstar will change her mind if we tell her what happened in

WindClan.”

“We could try,” Squirrelstar had conceded, “but if Harestar is still determined not to make a move unless RiverClan turns on Splashtail, SkyClan’s agreement won’t make much difference. No, we wait.”

Now, on a day of sparkling sunshine when Nightheart’s paws itched to be up and about, it was even harder to accept that his Clan leader was right. They could do nothing unless RiverClan moved first.

He turned to gaze at Sunbeam, reveling in the glow from her beautiful eyes as she returned his glance.

“Are you ready to fight alongside your new Clan, if it comes to that?” he asked Sunbeam.

“I am,” Sunbeam responded, her voice determined. “When I first came to ThunderClan, I was worried that there might one day be a battle against ShadowClan, and I would have to fight against my Clanmates and kin. That wouldn’t have been easy, I admit. But I have no attachment to Splashtail or his followers—and I believe he’s bad for all the Clans.”

Nightheart leaned across to lick her ear, then relaxed, gazing across the camp and watching the apprentices, who were cleaning up the mess left by the storm. The whole camp was strewn with bark, twigs, and even some bigger branches, choking up the entrances to the dens and getting in the way of cats who were trying to do their duties.

“Wafflepaw is doing well,” Sunbeam remarked.

Nightheart nodded, proud to see his apprentice taking charge of the younger cats. Wafflepaw was directing Stempaw and Bristlepaw to pile up the debris near the entrance to the thorn tunnel, while he and Graypaw picked up as much as they could carry in their jaws and hauled their bundles out through the tunnel into the forest. Already sections of the smooth earth floor were appearing from beneath the scattered rubbish.

But one cat Nightheart had been expecting to see was not there. “Where’s Wasp?” he asked, half to himself. “I know he’s a guest here and he doesn’t have any tasks of his own, but he shouldn’t expect to get to just sit around and leave all the work to other cats.”

I don't know what's going on with Wasp, he reflected. At the Gathering, Wasp had declared his intention of returning to the park, but he had made excuses whenever Squirrelstar asked him when he would leave, and then the storm had made it impossible to travel. More than once, Nightheart had spotted him gazing wistfully across the lake in the direction of RiverClan.

Nightheart rose to his paws, and as Wafflepaw emerged from the tunnel again, he beckoned him with a wave of his tail. "Hey, Wafflepaw!" he called.

Wafflepaw turned to the other apprentices. "Carry on with the cleanup," he told them. Then he came bounding over; he was panting with exertion and his fur was bristling with scraps of leaf and twig. "Yes, Nightheart?" he mewed.

"You're doing a great job," Nightheart told him. "But what has happened to Wasp? Shouldn't he be helping you?"

To his surprise, Wafflepaw didn't answer. Instead he shot him a single guilty glance, his muscles tensing, and then bent his head and studied his paws.

"Wafflepaw? What's wrong?" Nightheart asked. When the new apprentice still didn't reply, he put all the authority he could summon into his voice. "Wafflepaw, I am your mentor. If something is bothering you, you have to tell me about it. Now, where is Wasp?"

Wafflepaw raised his head and met Nightheart's gaze. When he spoke, his voice was scarcely above a whisper. "He . . . he went to RiverClan."

"He did *what*?" Nightheart's bewilderment changed to anger, though he tried to choke it down. He guessed that whatever had happened, it hadn't been Wafflepaw's fault. "Is he completely mouse-brained? Doesn't he know what life is like in RiverClan right now?"

"I *told* him that," Wafflepaw responded wretchedly. "But I couldn't make him listen."

Nightheart took a deep breath. "Okay," he meowed. "Let's sit down and you can tell me exactly what happened."

Wafflepaw almost collapsed beside him, tucking his paws underneath him in a tight crouch. "I'm so sorry," he whispered.

Nightheart brushed her shoulder with his tail-tip. "I'm not angry with you," he told him. "I appreciate your telling me now. So . . . when

did Wasp leave?"

"Yesterday, as the storm was dying down," Wafflepaw replied. "He's been talking for the last few days about how we 'came here to be RiverClan cats,' and how sorry he was that he hadn't had the chance to do that. I didn't take him seriously—or at least, I thought he was still going to go back to the park, like he said he would at the Gathering. Then, when we were sheltering from the storm, he said that it was his destiny to be a RiverClan cat, and that he was going to go over there and *make* them take him in."

Nightheart heard a sharp intake of breath from Sunbeam. "He must have bees in his brain," she declared. "How many cats do you think there are who can *make* Splashtail do anything?"

"Wasp wanted me to go with him," Wafflepaw continued. "He said I was meant to be a RiverClan cat, too."

"But you didn't go?" Nightheart locked his gaze with Wafflepaw's. He was here now, but who knew where he had been during the storm and the night that followed. "Wafflepaw, please tell me you haven't set paw on RiverClan territory!"

"Of course I haven't!" Wafflepaw's voice was shaking; he was half indignant, half upset. "I am a *ThunderClan* cat! But when I saw that I couldn't talk Wasp out of it, I did go a little way with him, just as far as the lake. He hasn't gotten to know the territory as well as I do, and I was afraid he would get lost. Then I watched him go along the lakeshore toward SkyClan, and after that I came home."

Nightheart let out a long sigh. "If only you had come to me," he meowed. "I might have—" He broke off, realizing what he had just said. "Of course, you couldn't come to me . . . I was away in WindClan. I'm sorry, Wafflepaw. I wasn't here when you needed me."

Guilt tore at him like an eagle's claws. *I'm a rotten mentor. I don't deserve to have an apprentice. Or a mate either,* he added to himself. *I haven't been here for Sunbeam when she needed me.*

"It's not your fault, Nightheart," Sunbeam reassured him, as if she had heard his thoughts. "We were needed in WindClan, and what we did there made Harestar change his mind about opposing Splashtail. No cat can be in two places at once, not even you."

Nightheart touched her ear briefly with his nose, grateful for her support. Turning back to Wafflepaw, he asked, "Does Squirrelstar

know anything about this?”

Wafflepaw shook his head. “I didn’t dare tell her, or Ivypool. I hoped that Wasp might change his mind, or that maybe the RiverClan cats would send him away, and then no cat would ever need to know.”

“Well, Squirrelstar will have to know now,” Nightheart sighed.

“I’ll fetch her.” Sunbeam scrambled to her paws and dashed off toward the tumbled rocks.

“What do you think will happen to Wasp?” Wafflepaw asked in a small voice.

Nightheart didn’t want to think about it. An experienced warrior would think twice about walking alone into Splashtail’s territory. Frostpaw had told him and Sunbeam about how she’d spied on RiverClan and found Splashtail aggressively training his warriors for battle and stirring them up against RiverClan’s supposed enemies. For Wasp—still a park cat at heart, with no warrior training—ambling onto RiverClan’s territory could be disastrous.

“If he’s lucky, they’ll just throw him out,” Nightheart replied. “And if he’s not . . .” The words died in his throat. It was a horrible thing to think about.

Wafflepaw stared at him in horror. He didn’t need Nightheart to tell him what Splashtail and his enraged RiverClan warriors would do to spies.

While Nightheart was trying to find words to comfort him, Squirrelstar padded up with Sunbeam at her shoulder. “What’s this I hear about Wasp going to RiverClan?” she asked, her expression stern.

Wafflepaw swallowed nervously, and then repeated the story he had told Nightheart. “I tried so hard to stop him,” he finished. “But it was no use. He really wants to be a RiverClan cat.”

Blinking thoughtfully, Squirrelstar considered what she had been told. Nightheart exchanged a tense glance with Sunbeam. He liked Wasp, even though the brown tom hadn’t wanted to join ThunderClan, and he hated to think of what might be happening to him in RiverClan now.

If he even got there. He might have met a fox on his travels. . . .

“Squirrelstar, what do you think we should do?” he asked when several moments had passed without any comment from his Clan leader. “If Wasp has gone to RiverClan, he could be in deep trouble. There must be some way we can get him out of there.”

Squirrelstar turned her head to look at him; her eyes were like chips of green ice. “There is *no* way we can get Wasp out,” she meowed.

“But there has to be!” Wafflepaw burst out, springing to his paws. “We can’t just leave him in RiverClan.”

“Wafflepaw, you haven’t been a Clan cat for long,” Squirrelstar responded. “And for that reason, I will be lenient about what you did —or what you didn’t do. Once Wasp had told you about this reckless plan, you should have informed me or Ivypool at once.”

“I know,” Wafflepaw whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“If you had, we might have caught him before he ever reached RiverClan. But now . . .” Squirrelstar flexed her claws a few times, clearly disturbed. “Splashtail knows that Wasp has been living here in ThunderClan,” she continued. “He will think of him as a ThunderClan cat, and whatever Wasp might tell him about wanting to join RiverClan, Splashtail will surely believe that he is a ThunderClan spy. And you can imagine what that cat will do to spies.”

“Oh, no . . .” Wafflepaw sank to the ground again, gazing up at Squirrelstar with pleading in her eyes. “Squirrelstar, let me go and look for him. Please.”

“I’ll go with him,” Nightheart mewed immediately, and Sunbeam added, “So will I.”

There was pain in Squirrelstar’s green eyes as she shook her head. “Wasp is not a ThunderClan cat,” she responded. “I will not risk my warriors to rescue a cat who ran into danger of his own accord. No, Nightheart,” she went on, raising her tail as Nightheart opened his jaws to protest. “That is my final word.”

Nightheart couldn’t bring himself to abandon Wasp without at least trying to argue, but before he could say anything more, he heard the sound of movement in the thorn tunnel. Finleap emerged into the camp; Nightheart stiffened as he saw that Tigerstar and Frostpaw were following him. Poppyfrost brought up the rear.

“What now?” he murmured to Sunbeam. *Tigerstar is the last cat we need, in the middle of all this trouble about Wasp.*

Finchlight, Bayshine, and several other ThunderClan cats drifted closer, looking just as puzzled as Nightheart about what the ShadowClan leader wanted. The three young apprentices bounded up to stand beside their mentors, while the elders emerged from their den, and Alderheart poked his head out from behind the bramble screen that sheltered the medicine cats’ den.

Squirrelstar padded up to meet the visitors. “Greetings,” she mewed. “What can we do for you, Tigerstar?”

The ShadowClan leader dipped his head respectfully. “Greetings, Squirrelstar. Frostpaw and I have come to discuss the situation in RiverClan. From what Frostpaw tells me, it seems that Harestar has changed his mind.”

“Yes, you’re right that we need to talk,” Squirrelstar responded. Noticing Nightheart and Sunbeam listening from a few tail-lengths away, she beckoned them over with a twitch of her tail. “You may as well come and join in,” she told them. “You were ThunderClan’s eyewitnesses.”

Nightheart nodded, then turned toward Bayshine, Finchlight, and Molewhisker. “The cleanup is almost finished,” he meowed. “If you’re taking your apprentices out, will you take Wafflepaw too? He needs some good, hard training, and I have to see what Tigerstar wants.”

“Sure we will,” Bayshine responded. “We’ll work him until his paws drop off!”

“Go with them,” Nightheart directed Wafflepaw. “It will take your mind off Wasp. And try not to worry about him,” he added in a softer voice. “It might not be as bad as we fear.”

Wafflepaw nodded silently, looking unconvinced, and padded over to join the others, his head and tail drooping. *There must be something we can do,* Nightheart thought, his pelt shivering with pity for his apprentice.

With a nod of thanks to his Clanmates, Nightheart padded over to where the leaders were waiting, with Sunbeam at his shoulder. He felt a mixture of relief and tension swirling around inside him: tension because war with RiverClan might be drawing closer, relief because now there might be an end in sight.

Squirrelstar led the way to the niche in the rock wall where she and Tigerstar had discussed how Splashtail and Podlight had mocked the nine-lives ceremony on their visit to the Moonpool.

“I understand that Harestar will only join in an attack if it begins within RiverClan,” Tigerstar began when every cat was settled. “And I think that’s your view too, Squirrelstar.”

Squirrelstar nodded agreement.

“While I support that approach,” Tigerstar went on, “I am worried. Frostpaw told me that Duskfur, Icewing, and others were trying to turn their Clanmates against Splashtail, but we haven’t heard anything about how they’re doing. What if it isn’t happening? Or, even worse, what if Splashtail has silenced them?”

A shudder passed through Nightheart, icy as the wind. He didn’t want to believe that a Clan leader would turn on his own Clanmates, but Splashtail had already shown what he was prepared to do when he killed Reedwhisker. Nightheart doubted that being leader would change his violent nature.

“How long can I be expected to live with a murderous, fraudulent leader on my border?” Tigerstar continued. “I will not risk my Clanmates’ lives.”

Squirrelstar let out a deep sigh. “I understand why you’d be worried,” she responded. “But if ShadowClan, ThunderClan, *and* WindClan come charging into RiverClan and try to depose their leader—a leader who their warriors believe was chosen by StarClan—things will just get even worse than they are now. Frostpaw, tell me what Mothwing, Duskfur, and Icewing told you.”

The young medicine cat dipped her head politely to the ThunderClan leader. “No more than what Tigerstar has already said,” she replied. “They are trying to win over their Clanmates, but they know it will not be easy.”

“Even if they are trying,” Squirrelstar mewed with a sigh, “there are only three of them, and if it comes to a fight, they might be defeated by younger, stronger warriors. Mothwing hasn’t fought for a long time.” She flexed her claws in frustration, digging deep into the ground. “I just wish there were some way to find out if they’re making any progress.”

A silence fell over the group. Nightheart glanced at each of the other cats in turn; they looked just as confused as he felt.

“I could go and spy on RiverClan,” Frostpaw offered at last. “I’ve done it before and gotten away with it.”

Nightheart wasn’t surprised—he had seen enough of Frostpaw’s courage on their journey—but he was worried about what Splashtail would do to her if he caught her.

Squirrelstar obviously shared his worries. “It’s not safe,” she objected.

“It’s a risk,” Frostpaw admitted. “But I know RiverClan territory better than any cat here. I know where to hide so that I can hear but not be seen.”

“It’s not my place to give you permission, nor is it Tigerstar’s,” Squirrelstar continued, respect for Frostpaw in her green eyes. “You’re not our Clanmate. But if you go, perhaps you should not go alone. I would feel better if whatever you find were witnessed by ThunderClan cats as well.”

Nightheart pricked up his ears, excitement surging through him. *Now at last I can do something useful! And maybe somehow we can help Wasp,* he added to himself. “I’ll go with her,” he volunteered.

Sunbeam’s eyes were shining. “So will I!”

Squirrelstar glanced at Tigerstar, then nodded. “Very well. You two may go with Frostpaw. And may StarClan be with all three of you.”

Chapter 21

As Nightheart turned to lead the way out of the camp, there was more movement in the thorn tunnel. To his astonishment Wasp was thrust staggering into the camp, followed closely by Sneezecloud and Gorseclaw of RiverClan.

"Wasp!" Nightheart exclaimed, bounding over to the three cats.

Before he could reach them, Sneezecloud blocked him with his body and gave him a vicious shove. Nightheart stumbled backward but managed to stay on his paws. Letting out a challenging hiss, he dropped into a crouch, ready to leap on the RiverClan cat.

"Nightheart, no!" Squirrelstar stalked across the camp, fury flaring in her green eyes and her shoulder fur bushing up as she faced Sneezecloud. "How *dare* you set paw on *my* warrior in *my* camp?" Her voice was an icy rasp. Nightheart had never seen his Clan leader so angry; he was glad that he wasn't on the receiving end.

"Fox dung to that!" Sneezecloud snarled. "This lump of crow-food was trespassing on our territory."

"I was not *trespassing*!" Wasp retorted hotly. "I was looking to join your Clan."

"Huh!" Gorseclaw sneered. "Like we'd want you, mange-pelt!"

By this time more cats had appeared from the warriors' den, with Ivypool, Birchfall, and Stormcloud in the lead, and they padded up to stand in a ragged half circle behind Squirrelstar. Nightheart rose to his paws and joined them, and Sunbeam bounded over to his side; the RiverClan cats would know what to expect if they decided to attack.

"You are not welcome here," Squirrelstar continued, her voice as cold as a wind in leaf-bare, sweeping across frozen wastes. "Go. Now. Ivypool, take a couple of warriors and escort them to the border."

"Oh, we can't go just yet," Gorseclaw declared. "We have a message from Splashstar."

Squirrelstar gave a curt nod. "Go on."

"Our leader said, 'Tell these flea-ridden ThunderClan cats that maybe this cat is just a mouse-brain who thinks he can stroll into

RiverClan and be welcomed.’”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised,” Sneezecloud put in. “What cat wouldn’t prefer RiverClan to ThunderClan?” His mouth twisted into a sneer. “You ThunderClan cats think you’re so great!”

“Splashstar said, ‘On the other paw, maybe he’s a spy for ThunderClan,’” Gorseclaw continued. “‘And if any other cat sets paw on RiverClan territory, they’ll receive an appropriate punishment for spies.’”

Nightheart felt as if his heart had slammed into his throat. *That’s exactly what we were planning to do!*

“Very well,” Squirrelstar meowed. “You’ve given your message. Now get out. Ivypool . . .”

The Clan deputy stepped forward, beckoning to Stormcloud and Shellfur to accompany her. “What are you waiting for?” she asked as she stalked up to the RiverClan warriors. “Move.”

Gorseclaw and Sneezecloud turned to go, but just before he entered the tunnel, Gorseclaw turned back. “Keep your paws out of our territory!” he growled before he disappeared.

Wasp was left standing in the middle of the camp, his head bowed. His fur was clumped; here and there a tuft was missing, and there was dried blood from a scratch above his eye. He didn’t look badly injured, but Nightheart thought he had never seen a more miserable-looking cat.

Squirrelstar turned toward him, her tail-tip twitching angrily. “Wasp, what were you *thinking*? You could have been killed. And you’ve caused more problems between ThunderClan and RiverClan at the worst possible time.”

“I’m so sorry, Squirrelstar.” Wasp cast a swift glance at the Clan leader, then went back to staring at his paws. “But I’ve dreamed for so long of being a RiverClan cat.”

“I know.” Squirrelstar’s green gaze softened, and her tone was sympathetic. “But you should understand that it’s not possible.”

“I do understand it now,” Wasp responded. “And it doesn’t matter what’s going on in RiverClan at the moment. I’ve realized that I’m just not the sort of cat who can become a warrior. I definitely should return home to the park, where I belong.”

Squirrelstar nodded. “I think that is the wisest thing you could do.”

Before Wasp could respond, Nightheart noticed Tigerstar padding up to join Squirrelstar. He had almost forgotten that the ShadowClan leader was there.

“You’ve had a busy morning, Squirrelstar,” Tigerstar murmured, a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

Squirrelstar gave him a startled look, as if she too had forgotten. “No more than I can handle, Tigerstar,” she meowed.

“I’m sure.” Tigerstar dipped his head politely. “I’ll get out from under your paws. But before I go, I just want to say one thing. Those two RiverClan warriors used to be decent cats. It’s Splashtail’s influence that’s changed them. If only we can get rid of him, they’ll soon change back. I’m certain of it.”

“I hope you’re right, Tigerstar,” Squirrelstar responded.

With another dip of his head, Tigerstar padded across the camp and into the thorn tunnel.

He had scarcely disappeared when there was a rush of paw steps; Bayshine and Finchlight bundled into the camp, with their apprentices and Wafflepaw.

“Wasp!” Wafflepaw cried out. He rushed over to his friend and pressed himself against his side. “Are you all right?”

“We met the RiverClan cats on their way to the border,” Bayshine explained. “We were sure they must have brought Wasp back.”

“They did,” Squirrelstar told him. “And it’s good that you came back, Wafflepaw. You’re just in time to say goodbye to Wasp.”

Wafflepaw turned a shocked gaze on the ThunderClan leader. “You can’t throw him out!” he protested.

It was Wasp who replied. “She isn’t throwing me out. It was always agreed that we had to commit to ThunderClan or leave. And now *I’ve* decided that it’s time for me to go home,” he told Wafflepaw. His misery when he was returned to the camp had been replaced by determination. “I’ve loved being a guest in ThunderClan, but it was RiverClan I always dreamed of, and now . . . I know my heart is with the park and the cats there.”

“I’m going to miss you so much,” Wafflepaw murmured. “I wish you would stay and be a ThunderClan apprentice like me.”

“We’ll all miss you,” Finchlight put in.

Nightheart cast a quick glance at Squirrelstar. Her expression was giving nothing away, but he wasn't sure that staying in ThunderClan was an option for Wasp after what he had done.

In any case, Wasp wasn't asking for that. "If I could go to RiverClan—the real RiverClan—then maybe . . . But I know that can never be. And after what happened when I went over there, I'm certain that I'm not meant to be a warrior."

"But you'll be making the journey home alone," Bayshine objected. "It's bound to be dangerous. It took Nightheart and Frostpaw a long time."

Nightheart caught Wasp's eye. "There are dangers," he said, "but if you follow the path we took to get here, and keep a clear head, I have no doubt that you'll be okay."

"I'm not afraid," Wasp meowed sturdily. "The weather is good for the journey now," he continued, glancing up at the clear blue sky. "It's warm for the season, and we haven't yet had ice or snow. And besides, I'm sure that Riverstar will guide my paws and make sure I get home safely."

Nightheart hoped that he was right. He and Frostpaw had had a hard time finding the park. But somehow Wasp seemed to have grown after his disastrous visit to RiverClan. Nightheart could believe he had the courage and determination to reach the park safely, now that he knew that was the life he wanted. Regret pierced him like a claw; under different circumstances, Wasp would have made a good Clanmate.

"But you're hurt!" Wafflepaw protested. "At least stay a few days until you're strong again."

"I'm strong enough," Wasp insisted. "Those RiverClan cats roughed me up a little bit, but I'm fine, really."

"Finchlight, fetch a medicine cat," Squirrelstar ordered. "Wasp, Wafflepaw is right that if you are injured, you should stay here until you're healed."

Finchlight darted off and returned a few moments later with Alderheart and Jayfeather. She was explaining as they approached, "Wasp needs to know if he's fit to travel."

"Another mouse-brained cat who hasn't the sense he was littered with," Jayfeather grumbled. He sniffed Wasp carefully from nose to

tail-tip, then stood back with a brusque nod. “You’ll do,” he grunted.

Meanwhile Alderheart had returned to his den, and he emerged a few moments later with a leaf wrap of herbs in his jaws.

“You’ll need these if you’re leaving,” he told Wasp, setting the leaf wrap down. “These are traveling herbs. They’ll give you strength for your journey.”

“Thank you, Alderheart.” Wasp licked up the herbs, grimacing a little at the sharp taste, then straightened up. “It’s time,” he declared. Turning to Squirrelstar, he dipped his head in deepest respect. “I am grateful to you, Squirrelstar,” he meowed. “I’ve learned such a lot in ThunderClan. Even if I couldn’t join RiverClan, it was an honor to see how the Clans live. I’ll always remember you.”

“And we’ll remember you,” Squirrelstar responded. “I wish you a safe journey, and may StarClan light your path.”

Wasp dipped his head once more, then turned and headed toward the thorn tunnel. Wafflepaw kept pace with him, while Nightheart and the others followed.

Nightheart remembered how much he had come to like Wasp during their journey from the park. Even though he knew it was impossible, he still wished that the brown tom could have become a Clanmate. “Goodbye,” he mewed, “and may StarClan be with you.”

“Goodbye,” Wasp responded. “And thank you for everything.”

He pressed his nose briefly into Wafflepaw’s shoulder fur, then turned and disappeared into the tunnel.

“Goodbye, Wasp!” Wafflepaw choked out.

Sunbeam padded over to him and gave his ears a comforting lick.

“It’s time for you to leave too,” Squirrelstar told Nightheart, beckoning Frostpaw to join them with a sweep of her tail.

Nightheart was relieved. “You still want us to go, then?”

Squirrelstar’s green gaze was resolute. “Splashtail doesn’t scare me,” she replied. “And after his warriors made that embarrassing display in my camp, I can only imagine what he’s teaching them over there. So yes, go, but remember: Wasp’s escapade has made your mission twice as dangerous. If you’re discovered, I have no doubt that Splashtail will carry out his threat.”

Nightheart dipped his head in agreement, then caught his leader's eye. "I will be careful. We all will. But Splashtail doesn't scare me, either."

A short time later, the three cats headed toward RiverClan across WindClan territory. They were unlikely to run into trouble here now that Harestar was their ally, but they were still careful to stay within three tail-lengths of the lake.

"How are you doing?" Sunbeam asked Frostpaw, padding alongside the medicine cat. "The last few moons have been very tough for you."

"I'm okay," Frostpaw responded with a tiny shrug. "I just wish I could have done more to help my Clan out of this."

"What we're doing now will help," Nightheart assured her. "Once we discover what Duskfur has done to organize resistance, the other Clans will know what they have to do."

Frostpaw gave a murmur of agreement, though Nightheart thought she didn't look entirely convinced.

As they passed the horseplace, Nightheart noticed Sunbeam casting a longing look in the direction where her kin had made their camp. He rested his tail on her shoulder for a moment.

"I can't stop worrying," Sunbeam murmured. "I know I can't go looking for them now, but I wish I knew whether Berryheart is still alive. Especially after the storm. There isn't much shelter where they're living."

"Perhaps we can talk to Squirrelstar when we get back," Nightheart suggested, every hair on his pelt prickling with compassion for her pain. "She might let you go and look for them again."

Sunbeam blinked gratefully at him, then turned her face determinedly toward RiverClan. Nightheart admired her even more for how she could put her own worries aside and concentrate on helping the Clans.

The RiverClan markers were fresh and strong when the three cats reached the border. Nightheart raised his head to taste the air, but he couldn't pick up any signs of nearby cats.

“I think we can go ahead,” he mewed. “But remember: We absolutely cannot afford to get caught.”

Frostpaw led them, tracking the lakeshore until they reached a small stream. Along its banks thick clumps of watermint were growing. Frostpaw made them roll in it thoroughly to mask their scent. Then she showed them a place where the stream was narrow enough to leap over. “Silence from now on,” she breathed out. “Follow in my paw steps.”

With Nightheart right behind her and Sunbeam warily checking their rear, the three cats began to climb a long, grassy slope. Before he had gone many paw steps, Nightheart picked up the scents of a large number of cats up ahead, and could hear mingled growls and screeches. He realized that they must be drawing close to the RiverClan camp. *What’s going on?* he wondered. It sounded as if the Clan were being attacked.

The top of the slope was edged by bushes; Frostpaw wriggled her way into a clump of elder, beckoning Nightheart and Sunbeam to follow. Crouching beside her, peering through the branches, Nightheart realized that he was looking down into the camp. He heard Sunbeam beside him draw in a hissing breath.

There was no attack. What Nightheart could see was, in its own way, even more terrifying.

Twigs and larger branches, bark, and other debris from the storm were strewn across the camp. No cat had bothered to clear them up, and the reason was obvious. Splashtail was standing in the center of the clearing, and around him were what looked like all the cats of RiverClan. They were divided into pairs, practicing their battle moves, and Splashtail was stalking among them, yowling out his orders.

“Faster! Get those claws out! Let me see some fur fly!”

Battle training should not be this fierce, Nightheart thought, cringing to see that Frostpaw’s littermate, Graypaw, was joining in alongside his mentor. And they were fighting with claws unsheathed, which hardly ever happened in practice. Several of the warriors had bleeding wounds. *Why does Splashtail think he needs to do this? And why does he think it’s more important than tidying up the camp? They’re literally fighting on top of the rubbish!*

“Enough!” Splashtail growled when the training session had gone on for a few moments longer. He leaped up onto the tree stump from which he could imagine the RiverClan leader addressing the Clan during meetings. All around the clearing, his warriors slumped to the ground, panting and licking their wounds.

Splashtail cast a smoldering glance around the clearing. “Cats of RiverClan,” he began, “we have a fearful duty ahead of us. We all know that these traitorous cats believe they are safe, but they are wrong!” His voice rose to a furious screech. Nightheart wondered why he sounded so angry, almost as if he was losing his senses. *Who is he talking about? The other Clans?* “We will find them!” Splashtail continued, his teeth bared and his fur bushing up until he looked twice his size. “We will find them and they will *pay* for their betrayal! RiverClan must pull together if we want to survive.”

Nightheart and his companions hidden in the bushes exchanged uneasy glances. “Who are ‘they’?” Nightheart murmured. “The other Clans? ShadowClan?”

Frostpaw shook her head. “Splashtail knows where to find ShadowClan if he wants to,” she pointed out, scanning the crowd of cats intently. “No, this must be about *RiverClan* ‘traitors.’ Don’t you see who’s missing?” she whispered. “Duskfur, Mothwing, and Icewing.”

Nightheart scanned the crowd carefully, but he couldn’t spot any of the three she-cats Frostpaw had named. He felt like a heavy stone had dropped into his gut.

Oh, no. Have we come to check on the resistance too late?

Meanwhile, Splashtail was continuing his rant. “Yesterday they dared to challenge my orders! Then they left without my consent, in the middle of the night. Loyal RiverClan cats would never do such a thing. If we want RiverClan to be strong, then we *cannot* let them back in . . . but traitors must face punishment. . . .”

As their leader’s voice and gestures grew more and more deranged, Nightheart noticed that the cats in the clearing were looking deeply worried, their eyes stretched wide as they gazed up at Splashtail looming over them on the tree stump. Nightheart could see that no cat seemed to like what they were hearing, but he

guessed that they were all too afraid of Splashtail for any one of them to challenge him.

“At first I thought that ShadowClan was our enemy,” Splashtail continued. “But I was wrong. No, the enemy was much closer all along. And I will *not* put up with traitors living on RiverClan territory! Last night Duskfur, Mothwing, and Icewing were Clanmates, but today they are enemies. And enemies of RiverClan will be killed!”

He ended by gazing around the camp once more, as if he expected a thunderous caterwaul of support. Instead there was silence, the warriors stirring uneasily, their gaze now fixed on their paws.

Nightheart, Sunbeam, and Frostpaw had listened to Splashtail’s diatribe with horror. Frostpaw closed her eyes and shook her head as if she wanted to pretend that she hadn’t heard the threat to her Clanmates.

Then the voice of a she-cat piped up from the crowd, breaking the silence. “That’s right! That’s the only way to handle traitors!”

Nightheart turned toward the voice, which sounded unpleasantly familiar. Then his glance flicked to Sunbeam, who crouched frozen, staring.

I don’t believe it! he thought. *There’s no way that cat can be standing here. . . .*

Chapter 22

Oh, StarClan, no!

While the she-cat was speaking, Sunbeam scanned the crowd, looking for where the voice came from. When she spotted the cat who had called out, she felt as though her heart had slammed into her throat.

It's Berryheart! Oh, I can't believe this. . . .

At least her mother looked healthy; there was no sign of the wound in her hindquarters, and her body had begun to fill out as if she had been eating well. Her black-and-white pelt had recovered its sheen, and her eyes were bright. She spoke with confidence and seemed quite at ease in her new Clan.

When Sunbeam looked more closely at the other warriors in the clearing, she recognized her father, Sparrowtail, and her brother Hollowspring among them. Hollowspring had his head down; he was furiously licking at his chest fur as if he was embarrassed by his mother's outburst. Sparrowtail was gazing at Berryheart with a closed expression; Sunbeam had no idea what he was feeling.

She was so intent in gazing at her kin, so dismayed to see them there, especially with Berryheart supporting Splashtail's urge to kill, that she almost missed Frostpaw's murmured signal.

"Let's get out of here. We need to talk."

Nightheart gave her a nudge, and she followed Frostpaw out of the bushes and down the slope a few tail-lengths to where a dip in the ground gave them some cover. Once they were hidden again, there was an awkward silence, each cat looking at the others as if they didn't know what to say. Sunbeam crouched with every muscle tense, as if she were about to pounce on prey. She wanted to screech and tear at something, and it took a massive effort to control herself.

After a few heartbeats, she felt the gentle touch of Nightheart's tail as he stroked it along her back. The touch was comforting, and she managed to relax a little. "I'm sorry," Nightheart mewed.

Sunbeam shook her head helplessly. "I suppose I should be happy that Berryheart and the rest of my kin are alive," she

responded. “But are they fighting for Splashtail now? A *murderer*?”

“They don’t know everything we know,” Nightheart reminded her. “And we’ve seen Berryheart with Splashtail before, a long time ago when Berryheart was organizing the group against Tigerstar in ShadowClan. Remember when she brought her cats to a meeting with Splashtail, where he threatened to provide RiverClan with a medicine cat if StarClan refused to reveal one?”

Sunbeam felt as though a branch had fallen on top of her. “I’d almost forgotten that!” she exclaimed. “Berryheart started making plans to depose Tigerstar, and I assumed she’d stopped bothering about Splashtail and whatever he wanted. But when I didn’t show up to help bring Berryheart to ThunderClan so Alderheart and Jayfeather could treat her—”

“I hope you’re not blaming yourself,” Nightheart interrupted, his tone fierce in her defense. “Because it absolutely was *not* your fault.”

“I wish I could believe that,” Sunbeam sighed, struggling with a sick feeling of guilt. “But Sparrowtail must have felt desperate. It would’ve seemed as if going to RiverClan was their only hope of saving Berryheart’s life. Without my help, Splashtail must have been the only leader who would take them in.”

Nightheart nuzzled her shoulder, offering silent comfort.

“I’m so sorry for you, Sunbeam,” Frostpaw meowed. “I know all about difficulties with mothers. But we can’t go on talking about this now, because we have urgent decisions to make. Splashtail is threatening to kill Duskfur, Icewing, and Mothwing if he finds them.”

Her voice shook on the last few words, and she paused as if she needed a moment to collect herself. Sunbeam remembered that these were cats Frostpaw had grown up with; Icewing and Duskfur were both her kin, and Mothwing had been her mentor.

Frostpaw took a deep breath and went on. “These three cats are the true RiverClan, ready to fight to take the Clan back from Splashtail. They are the only hope of getting the other Clans to help in the battle to drive the false leader out. We have to find them before Splashtail’s warriors can—and warn them of what’s coming.”

“Of course we must,” Sunbeam agreed readily.

Before she could say more, renewed caterwauling broke out from the RiverClan camp, and a new voice rose up over all. “Splashstar,

listen. . . .”

At the sound, Frostpaw looked stricken, her jaws gaping and her eyes wide with dismay.

“Wait . . .” Her voice was a rough whisper. “We have to hear this!”

Chapter 23

Bounding up the slope, Frostpaw plunged back into the clump of elder bushes and peered out across the camp. She let out a gasp as she saw what she had feared taking place before her very eyes.

Her former mentor, Harelight, had stepped away from the pairs of training cats and padded up to the tree stump where Splashtail was standing. The initial caterwauling had died away, and the assembled cats crouched to listen with whiskers quivering. Frostpaw could hear the Clan deputy's voice clearly.

"Splashstar, I admire your dedication to our Clan," Harelight began. "But perhaps we're being too harsh. Duskfur, Icewing, and Mothwing have been loyal to RiverClan for a very long time—since before you were even born."

The false leader stooped down from his position on the tree stump so that he was almost nose to nose with Harelight. "So how would you deal with these *traitors*?" he asked, his voice soft with menace.

Frostpaw felt a shiver run all through her, and was aware of Sunbeam and Nightheart pressing close to her on either side.

"It seems shortsighted to make them enemies without hearing what they have to say," Harelight continued; he spoke confidently, seeming completely unintimidated by Splashtail's threatening stance. "Whatever their reasons were for leaving, surely we can talk it out with them. I know RiverClan has been through a lot, but the solution isn't to divide and turn on ourselves. That will only make us weaker."

Splashtail tilted his head, blinking thoughtfully as he considered what his deputy had just said.

"Have I been too bold?" Harelight asked.

"No." Splashtail's voice was a purr rumbling from deep in his chest. "That's what a deputy is for, isn't it? To *challenge* their leader?"

Frostpaw felt as though icy water were creeping through all her veins. She remembered that tone, from when Splashtail was pretending to agree with her.

But Harelight still couldn't see that anything was wrong. "Of course, Splashstar," he responded. "A strong leader can take criticism and use it to make himself better. After all, you're young, and you have much to learn—"

"Indeed." Splashtail interrupted his deputy calmly. "Harelight, you have such a deep understanding of old RiverClan—the RiverClan that came into being after Leopardstar died. A peaceful, relaxed place, a RiverClan that just let the current float it wherever it would. . . . The cats of *that* RiverClan did not worry about territory, or strength, or legacy—they just sat on their paws all day."

The last few words were spat out viciously. Silence fell; Harelight stood looking up at his leader, as if he was unsure how he should respond.

Frostpaw saw Splashtail's muzzle twist. A heartbeat later, he launched himself from the tree stump, landed on top of Harelight, and carried him off his paws. Before the deputy could gather himself and react, Splashtail raised one paw, his claws unsheathed, and slashed them across his throat.

Frostpaw flinched, feeling again the sting of Splashtail's claws on her own throat. *Not again . . . not Harelight!*

Before any other cat could react, Harelight collapsed, limp, gasping as blood gushed out onto the camp floor. His paws kicked weakly as he struggled to rise.

Lizardtail let out a wail, and Frostpaw saw Gorseclaw collapse to the ground. She felt sick. She started forward, opening her jaws to cry out, but Nightheart slapped his tail across her face, while Sunbeam pressed close to her and whispered, "Don't. You can't help him."

"But Mothwing's gone," Frostpaw protested. "They have no medicine cat."

"It's too late for a medicine cat," Nightheart told her, deep sorrow in his eyes. "Look."

Gazing down into the camp, Frostpaw saw that Harelight's tortured struggle for breath had ended. His body lay still, with Splashtail standing triumphantly over him, his head and tail erect. The other cats watched in shock, their expressions full of mingled

fear and disgust. Lizardtail and Gorseclaw appeared to be frozen in their grief. But Splashtail didn't seem to notice.

"This is the *new* RiverClan," he announced. "A greater, stronger, more powerful Clan than it has ever been before. No longer will we wait for the approval of dead cats to do what we *know* needs to be done. We will do whatever it takes to make RiverClan the strongest Clan, the richest in prey and territory, the most influential. . . . We will enjoy our living seasons to the fullest, and not worry so much about what lies beyond. And I will take you there!"

The assembled warriors were now huddled together, gazing at their leader with blank, stunned eyes. *They're terrified,* Frostpaw understood. Harelight had been one of RiverClan's most respected warriors, as well as her mentor. Her own heart felt crushed under the weight of her grief, and she knew they felt the same. None of them shared Splashtail's vision, not when he was speaking while standing beside the blood-soaked body of his murdered deputy.

Splashtail didn't seem to see the reaction of his Clan. "First, I need a new deputy," he continued. "Some cat who understands what needs to change, and what RiverClan is meant to be. Creating a new RiverClan requires breaking some rules, so my new deputy will be . . . Berryheart!"

A gasp of amazement and dismay came from the cats in the clearing as Splashtail made the announcement. No cat protested; it was obvious that none of them would dare, fearing they might join Harelight, lying inert in a pool of their own blood.

Frostpaw looked on, numb with shock. For a moment all she could think of was that Splashtail had not spoken the right words to make a new deputy: *I say these words before the body of Harelight, that his spirit may hear and approve my choice.* Then she asked herself, *Why would he? He has done nothing but mock the spirits of his warrior ancestors.*

"Berryheart may not have been born in RiverClan," Splashtail continued, gazing around with massive self-satisfaction. "But we have spoken many times, and I know that our goals are aligned."

Berryheart did not look at all surprised by Splashtail's announcement. Frostpaw guessed that all this had been decided beforehand. *Berryheart hates all the Clans besides ShadowClan,*

doesn't she? Why had she agreed? What did she expect to gain from being RiverClan deputy? Frostpaw could only assume that Sunbeam was right: Berryheart saw this as her only chance at survival. And she seemed just as bloodthirsty, just as unmoved by the suffering of loyal RiverClan cats, as Splashtail, which made her the perfect cat to help him achieve his vision.

Frostpaw's chill deepened until she felt like a cat made of ice.

Beside her, Sunbeam was shivering as if she had just hauled herself out of freezing water. Frostpaw saw total bewilderment in her eyes, as if she could scarcely understand what was happening. "Did my mother agree to Harelight's murder?" she whispered.

Nightheart pressed himself close to her, and Sunbeam turned her head to bury her muzzle in his shoulder fur.

"I am honored to accept," Berryheart meowed. "I promise to serve my new Clan with all my strength and loyalty."

A few of Frostpaw's former Clanmates began to cry out, "Berryheart! Berryheart!" but the acclamation had a hollow sound, more fearful than rejoicing.

Frostpaw braced herself, giving her pelt a shake, and turned back to Nightheart and Sunbeam. She remembered the view of RiverClan that she'd had from the moors of WindClan, the stirring in her chest that had made her ache for home. At that moment, it had seemed that she might go back there soon. But now that home seemed further away than it had ever been.

"We have to find Duskfur, Icewing, and Mothwing," she hissed, "and any other cats they convinced to leave with them. We have to get them to safety immediately." With a catch in her throat, she forced herself to go on. "It's the only chance for the RiverClan I know to survive."

She could see that those chances of survival were shrinking. Ever since the storm and Harestar's change of heart, she had drawn strength from a sense of newfound purpose, a sense that StarClan had saved her when she had almost been murdered. But now she could see that destiny alone would not save RiverClan.

I'll have to fight for it, Frostpaw thought. *I only hope I'm strong enough.*

About the Author

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. She is the bestselling author of the Seekers, Survivors, Bravelands, and Bamboo Kingdom series. Erin lives in the UK. Enter the wild at warriorcats.com.

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Cover design by Chris Kwon

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023943265
Digital Edition APRIL 2024 ISBN: 978-0-06-305033-4
Print ISBN: 978-0-06-305033-4

FIRST EDITION

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